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THRILLING DETECTIVE



**Hibiscus
AND
HOMICIDE**
A Mystery Novel
By WILLIAM
CAMPBELL GAULT

C. S. MONTANYE • JACK KOFOED
WYATT BLASSINGAME • CARL G. HODGES

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LX, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

October, 1947

A Complete Mystery Novel



HIBISCUS AND HOMICIDE

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

Honolulu private eye Sandy McKane liked to take things easy—until his girl friend got tangled in the swiftest murder merry-go-round ever to hit the Pacific Paradise! 11

Two Complete Novelets

MURDER ON MIDNIGHT Wyatt Blessingame 40
A beautiful tropical Key was a modern Eden until the lure of wealth loosed an evil serpent whose weapon was slaughter!

THIS WILL KILL YOU C. S. Montanye 62
When Johnny Castle finds a body in a Broadway siren's boudoir, he plays a strange game of hide-and-seek with both cops and robbers!

Five Short Stories

HOLLYWOOD MURDER Jack Kofoed 55
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MARC OF THE BEAST Allan K. Echols 85
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THE BIGGEST FISH Ray Cummings 93
Larry Walsh had plenty to learn about cold-blooded murder and its results

HOMECOMING Carl G. Hodges 98
Chip Wright gives Boss Bozzoni's hoodlums a taste of real tough stuff

and

HEADQUARTERS A Department 6
Where readers, writers and the editor meet

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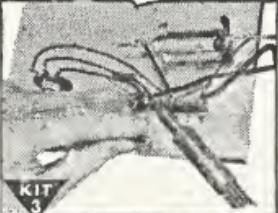
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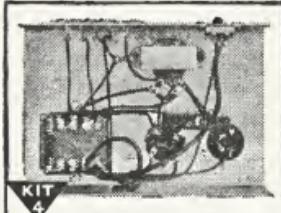
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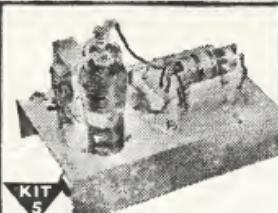
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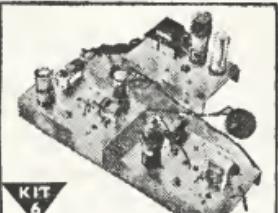
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WE HAVE a sneaking suspicion that even though the leading character, as well as the author of our forthcoming novel, are fairly new to THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine, they will both be warmly welcomed by our readers. It is only a couple of issues since we first presented two-fisted Race Williams in a story by Carroll John Daly—and the favorable comments have been coming in thick and fast.

So if you are one of the many who liked "This Corpse on Me," we think you're going to be glad we have said encore to author Daly so soon. Come along in again, Race, this time with:

I'LL FEEL BETTER WHEN YOU'RE DEAD

by
CARROLL JOHN DALY

Come on in swinging—come on in shooting! We have an idea you're going to be mighty popular around here!

It's Riley who gives Williams the tip, and Riley has never yet given him a wrong steer. But "casing" the joint, Race Williams just can't see any bunch of hoods bringing Judson Master's daughter to such a down-at-the-heels dump as the Crescent hotel. However, Riley's tip is that there's a kidnaped girl at the Crescent. If Williams can bring her back, alone and unaided, without notifying the police, it means ten grand lining the inside of the private detective's pocket.

It costs Williams a century-note to have the bartender even rise to the bait, but Race knows there is a kidnaped girl in the Crescent hotel, only things aren't going to be easy.

The detective notices those four hoods

moving threateningly toward him. When one of them knocks the neck off the gin bottle and actually moves the jagged glass toward his face, Williams knows exactly what to do and does it. He takes one shot at the hood. Then he crashes the nose of his pistol right across the skull of another thug known as Granger. Oh yes—they certainly are holding a snatched girl up in Room 305 and did you ever see such a change in the attitude of a couple of hoods!

The Wrong Victim

Race Williams finds her, nicely trussed up. Only it isn't Gloria Masters. What is more to the point—it is Sally Evers, and many a night Williams has seen her at the Five Star Club, run by Johnny Rainer. Not only why—but who has kidnaped Sally?

It seems Sally is "going places." Ben Tyler is her agent, and Kent Mason of Superior Pictures is around. Sally sees no reason why she should pay so much so-called "commission" in so many places. To blazes with all these gunsel. Sally decides to sign up.

She doesn't expect a snatch and a threatened rub-out. Race Williams comes along in time to save her life.

Poor Sally—she doesn't realize at first that the trail leads all the way up to George Latham. Yes, that's "the" George Latham—good old "Horse Face." You see, Latham is a business man. The law doesn't even think of pinning anything on him. A modern Professor Moriarty, an ugly spider in a veritable web of crime, if there ever was one!

Race Williams knows that he will need every ounce of his resourcefulness. He has always boasted that nothing was too tough

(Continued on page 8)

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D. E. G., Wauau, Wise.



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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

for him. And Sally won't cooperate. She wants to know when Race Williams is going to quit "playing with fire and dynamite and T.N.T."

Personally, we hope he'll be around for some time to come. If we ever presented a hero who is "hot as a firecracker"—Race Williams is the fellow. Look forward to I'LL FEEL BETTER WHEN YOU'RE DEAD. You'll be glad we told you about it!

Also in the next issue, a humdinger of a novelet:

THE STRANGLER

by

CURTISS T. GARDNER

Let us imagine the dank, fetid swampland and lake country of Florida known as the Everglades. There are snaky mangrove roots and decaying vegetation, while the Spanish moss hangs limp from the cypress trees. It is late at night and Tom Ward is adrift in an open boat, at the mercy of the current. The only light he has is the dull glow from his pocket flashlight. The battery of this is nearly exhausted. Then the darkness will be complete.

Things were not this bad when he first left his own cabin. He left in a great hurry when he received that telephone call from Urquart, his friend downriver. While wandering around in the palmetto scrub, little Mort was bitten by a rattler. Will Ward come at once and bring the serum? Tom Ward realizes the quickest way to get there will be by boat. There is an outboard motor, of course.

But after a few miles, the motor fails. The gas tank is empty. Ward is not worried. He always carries an emergency can of gas. Picking it up, he sees the great gash and knows that it has been deliberately stove in. He is adrift with the breeze pushing him gradually ashore!

The Body in the Boat

In sheer desperation, he looks in the bottom of the boat, under the mullet net, for the oars. The oars are gone! But that isn't the thing that sends the worst chill up and down Tom Ward's spine. There, in the bottom of

(Continued on page 109)



Why be a Papuan?

OUR FRIEND, the anthropologist, told us that only a Papuan could have designed these ceremonial masks. We'd have believed him — except for one thing. We know the man who doodled them . . . just traced the outline of a paper clip and shaded to suit.

Try it. Or better yet — *don't* try it. There's no great demand for Papuans — or for constant doodlers — in the world of business and industry. The demand is for *trained* men and women. The large rewards — promotions, greater responsibilities, increased salaries — go to those who master commercial and technical subjects.

Training in all these fields is available through the International Correspondence Schools. In the time it takes a Papuan to make a mask . . . in the same time many a man spends in doodling . . . you can master Plastics or Accounting, Drafting or Radio — any of more than 400 subjects — through study with I. C. S.

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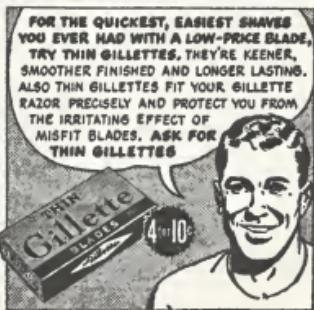
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INTO SHOAL WATER...





A Mystery
NOVEL

The girl had a flower in her hand and I didn't need a stethoscope to know she was dead.

Hibiscus and Homicide

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

Honolulu private eye Sandy McKane liked to take things easy — until his girl friend got tangled in the swiftest murder merry-go-round ever to hit the Pacific Paradise!

CHAPTER I

THEY SAY—"DOLLY DEAD"

HONOLULU is rarely hot—at least in the shade. That's not just a boast because I live there. But it was hot this day, even in my office

with the fan going and the shades down and a Tom Collins in my hand.

My office is on Hotel Street above a bookstore and across the hall from Dr. Ray Nakamura—Dentist (Painless)—or so the lettering on his door and window says.

I was nursing the drink, relishing it

in my sodden way and hoping no one would drop in, when someone did.

He was wearing cocoa-brown tropical-weight trousers that fitted the ankles very snugly and billowed above (zoot), some sort of lavender sport shirt with an open collar and a sport coat of some colors I'd never met before. The shoes were white buck and immaculate. The height was around five feet.

He was a Filipino and he was very grave standing there in the doorway in that ridiculous outfit. He had the face of a man who had lost too many fights.

I didn't get up but pointed to the chair on the other side of my desk.

"Drink?" I asked.

He shook his head. "You Sandy Mc-Kane?" He was walking toward the chair and he sat in it as he finished the sentence.

"Right."

"Detective?"

"Hmmm-hmmm. Girl trouble?"

He nodded eagerly. "How you know? You know me?"

With Filipinos it was always girl trouble. "I know you," I said. "Juan Mira. I saw you fight Billy Chun, Art Gutzdorf, Young Silva and . . ." I tapped my brow with my free hand, thinking.

"Val Yaguchi?" he suggested hopefully.

"That's it," I said. "You knocked him out in the third."

He nodded, sighing. "Him I can beat. Not many but him."

"You always try," I consoled him. "You always give them their money's worth. That's all a man's expected to give, his best."

"Yeh," he said. "Sure." But he didn't look consoled.

"And now your girl," I said.

He nodded dolefully and took a king-size cigarette out of an enameled case.

"Missing." He lighted the cigarette with a silver lighter. "A week ago. Left me."

I coughed in my genteel way. "You—ah—were—I mean, she lived near you?"

"Next room," he said. "Door between and—"

"Hmm-hmmm," I said quickly. "You mean you both live in a hotel?"

He nodded. "Kealia Hotel. I pay her rent and buy her clothes and feed her good and give her jewelry and leave her drive my car. We get along."

Until a week ago. "Local girl?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Filipino?"

He shook his battle-scarred head. "Chinese-Portuguese. Little Hawaiian maybe. You know, mixed."

How well I knew. "She didn't work?"

"Sometimes she sing, dance a little, make a little money. Why she work? She got Juan."

But Juan no got her now. Juan got heartache. What the boys in the ring couldn't do this girl could—hurt him, put him down.

"She's got a family?"

"In Wahiawa, I think. She no go there. No talk to them."

Or they to her, probably. Sing a little, dance a little, take Juan for a ride a little. No girl to be proud of surely—no daughter to show off to the local swains and their families.

"Juan," I said, "I don't think you want me. Maybe the Police Department, the Missing Persons Bureau or maybe Dorothy Dix. But not me. I cost money."

"Money I got. Don't worry about Juan."

"Sure. But you don't want to spend it for this. She left you, didn't she? You had a little squabble and she ran out on you?"

"No squabble. She no run out. I keep her happy. She leave no note, she say nothing. She not in town. I look all over town. I got friends. I ask them. They look. No Dolly, not in town."

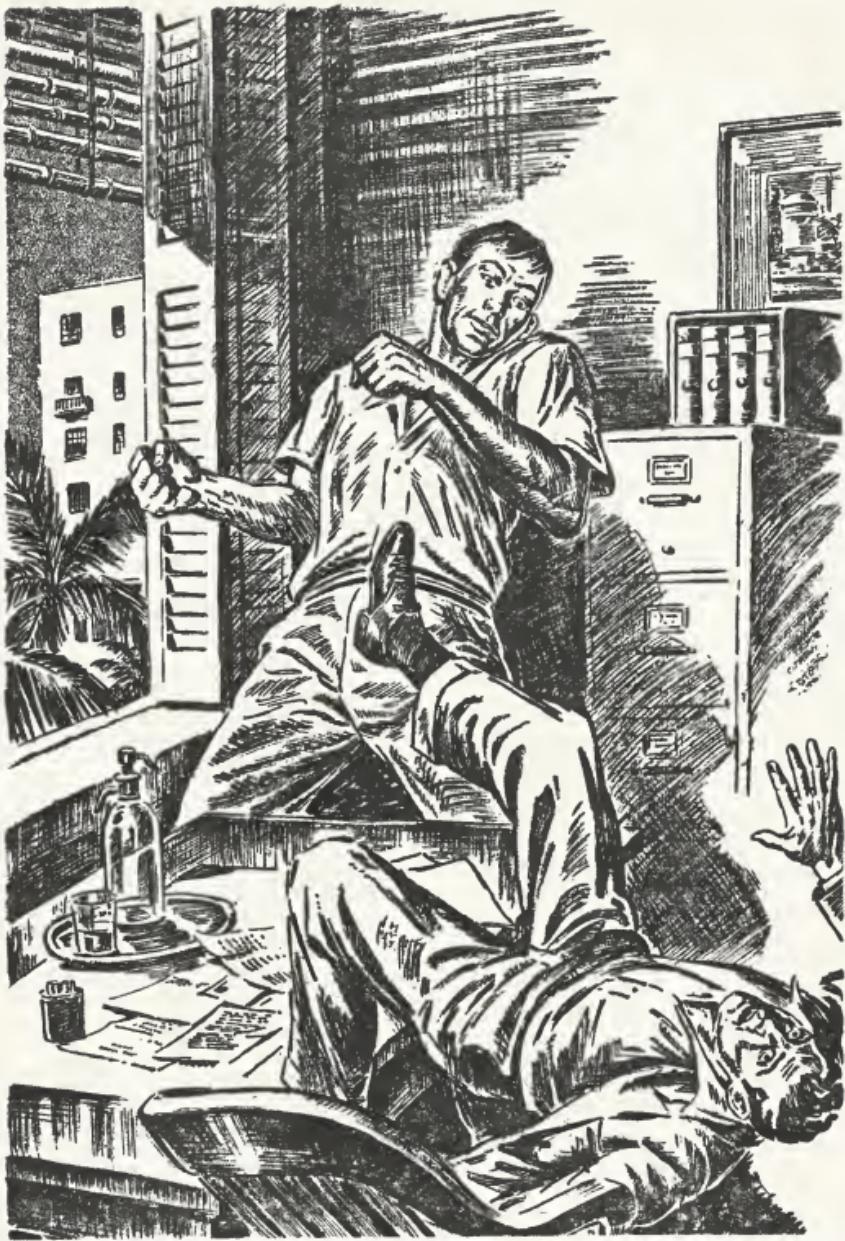
"And the Police?"

"I don't want no Police in my business. You don't want to work for me?"

"It's my business," I said, "but I want you to understand that I can't patch up a quarrel. That's not my business. And you're not at all sure, are you, that she didn't just leave you?"

He shrugged, and opened both hands, palms up and out. "She love me. I treat her fine. She treat me fine. Why she leave?" He stood up. "If she no love me, she get some one else. She no disappear."

"Maybe she went over to the big



Meat's big hand came around with surprising speed and slapped me out of my chair

island. Maybe her boy friend, her new one, doesn't live on Oahu."

"Okay. So you find out. I pay you." He had a billfold out and he was looking down at me. "How much you want?"

"Twenty a day and expenses."

THE bill he handed me was a century note. "For five days. Expenses I pay later."

For a man who lost all his fights the billfold was thick. He didn't make it betting on himself, that's for sure. Maybe—oh, well.

He reached into an inner pocket and brought out a studio portrait of the girl. "Dolly Valdez her name."

"And some of the places she worked?"

He told me and I wrote it all down, neat and businesslike.

"And her family's address?"

"Kam Highway, in Wahiawa, but I don't know exactly. Block after the bridge, I think."

"Okay, Juan," I said and I stood up. "I'll work on it. You still staying at the Kealia?"

He nodded.

"I'll get in touch with you," I told him and he left.

I sat down again and finished my drink slowly. My door was open and I saw a young Jap come out of the dentist's office, and I heard for a moment the sound of his drill. I heard the traffic in the street outside and my own conscience telling me not to have another drink, not to be slothful, to get to work.

So I mixed another one. I have a small, efficient second-hand mechanical ice chest. Honolulu isn't usually hot, but it does get warm, sort of.

Well, I had some business and I retired to my chair, sipping and turning it over in my keen mind and studying the picture of the girl, Dolly Valdez.

She had dark hair, dark eyes and merry, with a slant to them. Faintly round face, full lips, high cheekbones not so noticeable. Dolly Valdez who walked out on Juan Mira, maybe.

Folks in Wahiawa—danced a little and sang a little at—let's see. At the Hula Hut and Jerome's and the Kealia Pikaki Room. Drove his car and ate his food and shared his moods and probably watched him fight. Maybe that last was

why she left him.

It was now two-thirty, and Wahiawa is about twenty-odd miles. And the other places were in town. Wahiawa was for now, the others later.

Gulping the rest of my drink and belching in my high-bred way, the belch tasting of gin—going out in my wrinkled Palm Beach suit and no hat and climbing into my little convertible, which was an oven right now, an oven with a canvas top.

I drove out King Street to Dillingham Boulevard and out the Boulevard to Kam Highway past the Hickam Field gate and Pearl Harbor and out past the cane fields and a few pineapple patches. Then the winding uphill climb to Wahiawa in the shadows of the Waianae Range—Aiea, Waimalu, Pearl City, sounding foreign but looking like California.

Past Wheeler Field, an intersection, and there was the bridge Juan spoke of.

The right side of the road was lined with shops—a tavern, a hair dressing studio, a novelty store, a barber shop. On the left side there were four very decrepit shacks in the first short block beyond the bridge.

I swung the convertible in a U-turn. Eney, I said to myself, and meeny and miney and moe. I went to miney.

It was no better than the others and no worse. Up the rickety steps to the sagging porch and a knocking of the knuckles on wood.

There was a little window in the door with one dirty mesh curtain in this window and presently the curtain moved to one side and some old and tired Oriental eyes in an old and un wrinkled Oriental feminine face looked out and the door opened.

She wore one of those long-sleeved, ankle-length sheaths that the older members of the race cling to and her voice was pleasantly soft.

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon. I'm looking for some people named Valdez."

She inclined her head. "Next door."

Which would be moe. "Thank you," I said. "Hot isn't it?"

She agreed it was.

The moe house had a bedraggled banana tree in the front yard and a small patch of periwinkle and pikaki

near the porch but otherwise it was miney's twin—perhaps a little more slope to the porch.

It had a glass window in the front door but no curtain. A face there, like before, but a broad face, dark as oil rubbed mahogany, the wide, cheerful face of an Hawaiian matron.

"Aloha, good afternoon." She showed white teeth in a generous smile.

"Mrs. Valdez?"

The smile a laugh now, and the big body shaking slightly. "No, no, no. Mrs. Valdez in town, shopping."

Some joke, to her, that she should marry Valdez.

FOR Valdez was sitting there, a small and overalled Portuguese with some glasses on the table in front of him and a bottle and a cheap glass ash tray filled with cigarette stubs.

"I am Mr. Valdez."

"And I," I told him, "am Sandy McKane." I gave him my card.

He looked from it up to me and asked, "What is it you want?"

Well, what did I want? His daughter? "I'm investigating your daughter's whereabouts," I said. "Her fiance—"

"We do not speak of her in this house," he said and the house was the ancestral home, the castle, with the tone he put into that. "We have no information about her. We do not talk about her."

"You haven't seen her recently? This past week?"

"We have not seen her for two years. We do not care to see her."

The Hawaiian woman said nothing, watching him, then me, sorrow on her placid face, concern in those moist brown eyes. All heart, the Hawaiian. But Valdez—

He had no more for me. I went to the door. The Hawaiian woman said, "Wait. I go with you."

We went out together and down the rickety stairs. She was barefoot but the printed cotton dress she wore was spotless. She laid a big brown hand on my arm. "Dolly is dead."

I stared at her. She put a hand on her bosom. "I feel it here. Three nights ago I dream of her in the coffin, covered with hibiscus. I know then she is dead."

"I have to be sure," I said. "I can't tell my client that."

She shrugged. "You will find her dead."

"Look," I said, "Mr. Valdez doesn't seem to care but—"

"Him" she said, making it sound like a curse. "Pouf! That little rooster."

We belonged to the same lodge on that. "But, Mrs. Valdez," I continued, "couldn't we look her up? The shopping district isn't very big here in Wahiawa and—"

"I go with you," she said and we walked to the car.

The springs settled a little as she climbed in and I went around to get behind the wheel. Business of making another U-turn, and heading toward the heart of town.

An open market, fruit and an open market, meat and around the corner and up California Avenue and my stout friend said, "There, there, stop the car—" and I stopped it.

A short, stout and dark woman was moving along the walk here, carrying a basket. The dress was white and the complexion was Hawaiian but the eyes were Oriental.

"Mis' Kaipapu," Mrs. Valdez said, "Hullo."

Miss, or Mrs., Kaipapu left the car and whispered for a moment in consultation with Mrs. Valdez. Then they both came back to the car.

"You look for my daughter?"

I nodded.

"I no see her. Mis' Kaipapu say she dead. I believe."

"Okay," I said. "I'm going back your way if you want a lift."

They did and they settled in, neat and cozy and U-turn McKane went through his act again and we stopped in front of the first of the four houses. This was eeneey, the abode of the Lady Kaipapu, and they both wanted to get out there for some reason of their own. They did.

"Goodby," Kaipapu said and "Goodby," Mrs. Valdez said and Sandy McKane said, "You're sure there's nothing you want to tell me?"

Two heads shaking in the sunlight, two pairs of brown eyes candidly on my face but looking beyond me a little as though thinking of that lovely coffin

with the hibiscus.

I moved off, saying, "Goodby," and thinking that sixty cents should cover the gas on this trip, which meant sixty cents on the expense account for Juan Mira, the often defeated.

And, I thought, there's a lot of hibiscus in Hawaii, all colors—excepting one, which I've forgotten.

CHAPTER II

"MEAT" FOR DINNER



OWNHILL, most of the way, going back—and I needled the little convertible. But it was nearly five when I reached town and I was hungry. I thought it might be smart to eat, considering.

The Pikaki Room should have something edible. The Kealia Hotel was out in Waikiki but about a block inland from the beach. I drove out Kalakaua Avenue, past all the bathers' parked cars, past the proud arrogance of the Royal Hawaiian, all the exclusive little shops (for women), past the Moana and turned there on Kailani.

This Kealia was small compared to the Royal Hawaiian or the Moana but no less snooty, despite its lack of a beach—entirely too snooty to think of serving dinner at the ungodly hour of five.

Was the manager in? It wouldn't matter—I couldn't get dinner at five o'clock. The tanned blond hostess was sure of that.

Business of flashing a badge and looking official. Was he in?

Well she'd see, but she didn't think so. She was royalty, in white gabardine. She came back, nodded coolly and gestured with one proud hand toward a doorway.

This doorway opened into a little room, sort of a storeroom and office combined and a thin gray man in a seersucker suit was in there going over some bills at the desk. Gray eyebrows and gray hair, slim and tall, and the look he gave me was weary. Business must be bad.

No, he didn't know where Dolly Valdez was now. Yes, he had employed her at one time for a short engagement be-

cause of the—well, the insistence, almost, of one of the guests.

The guest would be Juan, the zoot boy, and how did he rate this elegant establishment on the loser's end of every purse?

There was nothing here. Going out again, I said thank you to the Princess Gabardine but her eyes were on the middle distance. Maybe, if they had a beach, things would be better. Or if they started dinner a little earlier for the proletariat.

Jerome's was out here, too—on Kala-kaua but closer to town. Red front door with a big brass knocker in the middle of it for effect only. I went in.

Neat and pleasant inside—maroon and ivory the motif. Maroon bar, and maroon carpeting in the dining room but rubber-tile floor in the bar.

A man in flawless white stood behind the bar, a man with a flat nose and not too much height and one of those perpetually tied bow ties. Charley—let's see—Charley Wright and a fair welter in his day.

"Sandy," he said. "Your thirst bring you in? Or your nose."

"A little of both," I said, "though I'm on the snoop."

"What'll it be?"

"Surprise me," I said. "I can drink anything. Boss around?"

He shook his head and reached for various bottles. "Fishing. And there'll be poker after that."

I asked him about Dolly Valdez.

He wrinkled his brow. "Chubby? Bouncy?"

"Could be." I showed him the photograph.

He nodded. "Sure, sure. Used to work here. Went over, too, but Mira put his foot down. Mira's girl, huh?"

"Guess so. He likes to think so."

He was still pulling out bottles for my surprise. I bring out the artist in him.

"She missing?" he said.

"She's missing from Mira. Of course, she probably isn't anti-social. A friendly type, probably, and—"

"Sure, sure," he said. "I haven't heard a word about her since she left here and the boss don't hear nothing I don't hear."

He set the drink in front of me and I

took a good healthy gulp.

The maroon merged with the ivory and Charley's questioning face started to revolve. It became a pinwheel and burst and order was restored. "Good, huh?" Charley said.

"Good," I murmured hoarsely. "Very effective." Charley had finally split the atom. He'd been working on it a long time. Sensitive, he is, so I finished it slowly and paid him and chatted of this and that and left.

Which left me only the Hula Hut, which was not in exclusive Waikiki, but in non-exclusive Honolulu, on Hotel Street, not far from my office. And I knew they had steaks.

It was a basement place and it was run by Vic Malis, who also ran other things in his efficient way.

Vic had his own ideas about decoration and none of them were good. There were fish nets on the walls and some cheap Hawaiian color prints. There was a mural behind the bar of a girl, not Hawaiian, coming out of the ocean dressed in a reflective look.

The waiters wore leis, artificial and slightly worn, and the music, though Island, had a faintly commercial twang.

At the door end of the bar, Vic's right-hand man was lounging and he should be worth a paragraph. His name was "Meat" Kozak, the Meat referring, no doubt, to the size of him, which was impressive. He was about six feet four inches and fifty pounds past the two hundred mark. Cauliflowered ears and a flat nose were souvenirs of the days Vic had thought this boy of his might bring him riches with his gloves. This boy hadn't. There hadn't been the proper coordination between his big body and his small brain.

MEAT was wearing sport shirt and slacks and sandals and a smile he thought genial which managed to stop just this side of grotesque.

"Evening, copper," he said.

I'm only six feet high, so I had to look up at him and, looking up, I couldn't put the proper contempt in my voice.



The occupant of the chair had curly blonde hair and there was a knife protruding from his throat

THRILLING DETECTIVE

"Hello, Meat," I said, looking around the place. "Vic in?"

"Not yet." Meat was cleaning his teeth with his tongue. "You got some trouble for him?"

I'd had some trouble for Vic Malis once before. "No," I said, "I don't think so. Just a little information if he's got it."

"I could answer any questions," Meat said.

"What's the plural of *alumnus*?" I said, obliging him.

"Fresh," he said, "ain't you?"

"Fresh and clean." I admitted. "It's so difficult, in this climate."

Meat worried that one, in his slow mind and chewed his lower lip in his thoughtful way and tugged at one battered ear.

Before he came out of it I said, "What I really wanted was a steak and this is the place to come for it."

The air of geniality struggled to get back to that broad face.

"Sure," he said. "We got some good ones, too."

Which they had. I took a table in the dining room near the barroom and ate one large porterhouse, rare. I had some coffee and a quarter of a head of lettuce with French dressing and some french fries and rye rolls and more coffee.

I was enjoying the second cup in company with a cigarette when the orchestra came in and began to play in their dispirited way. About five minutes after that there was a man in tan silk gabardine coming from an office behind the bandstand and walking toward my table.

Vic Malis had black hair and broad shoulders and very dark, very sharp eyes. He was about an inch under six feet. The suit, I saw on closer inspection, was beautifully tailored.

"Trouble again, Sandy?" he asked, sitting down in the chair across from me.

I shook my head. "Just routine. Checking on a girl that used to work here, a girl named Dolly Valdez."

I thought maybe there was a flicker in the dark, sharp eyes. "Private case?"

Meat was standing near, in the archway, and Meat wasn't missing a word. "Private," I admitted. Occasionally, I worked with the Police.

He was thoughtful as though considering his next question. Then, "Juan Mira looking for her?"

"Maybe. What makes you think so?"

"His girl, isn't she? He sure squealed plenty when she did work here. Always in here, every night, making trouble. She's got a lot to sell, that girl, but Juan thinks he's got a lease on it."

"Love," I said. "It does things to people."

"It didn't get him down to the License Bureau."

Who am I to judge? I am not Snow White. I asked, "Last time you saw her was when?"

"About four—five days ago. Came in for a job. I told her when she ditched the pocket-size Dempsey we'd do business. I can use her, all right. She's—okay."

"Good voice?"

He gestured noncommittally with a well-manicured hand. "Just ordinary. Personality—I don't know what you call it. Some of them have it and some wish they had it."

"She had it?"

"Yup. And she could deliver it."

Well, I thought, you dark-haired, dark-eyed gent of infinite smoothness, you will tell me nothing you don't want me to know—if you know it. I kept remembering the flicker when Dolly's name was first broached.

"Nothing more?" I asked.

"That's all, Sandy." There was only a shadow of hesitation before he said that. Maybe he was remembering the last time I'd gone up against him. And maybe he was honestly searching his mind. But it was the first glimmer I'd had that day.

"What's good to drink?" I asked. "What's new?"

He relaxed into his urbane host characterization then and smiled pleasantly. "The Ladies' Aid is quite a number." He rose, and left me to my thoughts, such as they were.

The Ladies' Aid came in a tall frosted glass, very thin and dainty. There was a sprig of mint in it and the color was somewhere between pink and amber but the hues changed from time to time, so I couldn't be sure.

I sipped it tentatively and it was all

right—it was fine. It brought out the poet in me. The place was beginning to fill up—and not with the wrong people completely. Vic had good food.

I was on my second edition of Ladies' Aid, when the girl came over to my table. She was in white linen with jet black hair and eyes as blue as the Waikiki sky and slim and with breeding. To my table.

I managed to get up without knocking it over.

"You've forgotten me, Saunders McKane," she said.

Saunders had been my name back in the days before I had to earn my daily bread, before Dad . . . but that's another story.

"How could I?" I lied gallantly, ransacking my mind and trying to look suave.

"You have. Don't you remember? You were fourteen and it was my first party and you didn't like girls much then and—"

Linda Ramsay—her family wasn't one of the Big Five but if it had been the Big Six they would be included.

"Linda Ramsay," I said, "and you weren't as beautiful then or my judgment wasn't as good."

"I had braces on my teeth," she said, "and some freckles."

I looked around the room. "You're with someone, of course?"

"N-no. I was waiting for someone. But I don't want to—"

I never did find out what she didn't want to do. I went around and pulled out a chair.

"We must talk," I said, "about the braces and Miss Devanty's School Of The Dance and Tommy Rice and the Kelton twins."

SHE sat down without further protest and I ordered her a rum and coke, which she said she liked. I ate her up with my eyes and said, "Start right after that first party and tell me all about it up to now."

She was pulling a cigarette out of a case and I snapped my lighter for her.

"What's there to tell?" she asked. "Ward-Belmont and then Columbia. I've been in the States most of the time since I left eighth grade. I just came back

here last summer."

"And Tommy Rice?"

"He's in California, working in a law office in Los Angeles, and doing very well, I hear."

So that was ended, I thought. Even back when she was fourteen it had been Tommy Rice. But there wasn't any regret in the voice, none I could notice. Just a simple stating of the facts, that last sentence, with perhaps too much monotone in the voice.

"The Keltons?"

"Dick was killed in France. Sue married some man from New York, a man named Manchester."

Which brought us to Miss Devanty's School Of The Dance, which would always be painful to me, and the braces, which wouldn't be tactful.

So I just sighed and looked at her. The orchestra seemed to be in tune, on this one.

"Dance?" I suggested.

She crushed her cigarette out in the ashtray in the center of the table and we rose and danced—slowly, and with grace, of course, and with excellent rhythm. Close, and not talking, naturally, and it was a pleasure to both of us especially me. Hadn't we both been trained by Miss Devanty?

Some more dancing followed and some more talk and some more of the things out of bottles and wasn't this friend of hers ever going to show up? I hoped not. He did, though.

He was a tall slim lad with a shadow of a mustache, blond—both the mustache and his curly hair—and he was tanned and in Palm Beach, not wrinkled like mine. His name, I heard dimly, was Jefferson Raleigh but I could call him Jeff—any time.

The reason I heard it dimly was because my mind was beginning to cloud over a little and I couldn't understand that. Liquor does things to me but I hadn't had enough.

Jeff and Linda danced. I tried to watch them and decided from what I could see that Sandy and Linda danced together with more skill.

Somebody brought another drink I hadn't remembered ordering. Perhaps Jefferson, called Jeff, had. I drank it at any rate.

They came back to the table, and their outlines weren't at all clear. "I think I need some air," I said.

Concern showed in Linda's face, maybe even in Jefferson's. Linda said, "We'll go with you. If you're ill—"

"I can't be drunk," I said. "It must be something else."

They went out with me. That much I remember. And I think I remember the voice of the man they later claimed took me home. He was supposed to have said, "Sandy's a friend of mine. I always take him home when he gets like this." The lying so-and-so.

That's all I remember about that.

Dreams, sure—I was with Linda in a cloud castle high above Diamond Head and she was trying to take the braces off my teeth. And Jefferson Raleigh was dancing all by himself while kids threw pennies at him.

There were some other dreams, mixed and ugly, and the smell of something like ether and I fought to open my eyes because it seemed important at the time. The ceiling I saw above me was papered in blue, blue with silver stars. I could make that out in the dim light. My head was full of fog and the stars above began to move.

I wanted to close my eyes. Perhaps, if I did, the whirling in my head would go away and the sickness in my stomach. I was about one eighth of an inch away from active nausea. I wanted to close my eyes.

I kept them open. I was on a bed, soft with silken coverings, a double bed. My eyes moved down from the ceiling and I saw that the wall paper on the walls was blue and silver too but these were stripes, not silver stars in the blue background.

This wasn't my bedroom, I realized. There was a night lamp on the table to my right but it wasn't on. The light came from some wall brackets—cream colored.

I swung my feet off the bed and saw I was in pajamas. I swung them to the floor and started to get up, and I was a sixteenth of an inch away from active nausea and knew I'd never find the bathroom in a strange house.

But there was the window, open, and I stumbled toward that and hung my

head out of it and most of my upper body and let nature take its course.

My knees were rubber and my head was full of gravel and my tongue was just an old bar rag. I got up from the window and swayed a moment, holding the wall. Then I turned slowly.

I hadn't been sleeping alone though I had been the only one just sleeping. There was a girl in the bed, not covered, wearing a robe of silk, white silk, which afforded no coverage at the moment. I didn't need the photograph to see it was Dolly Valdez despite her mottled, purplish face.

I didn't need a stethoscope to know she was dead. She had a flower in her hand, a five petaled flower which is bred in all the colors excepting one, a hibiscus.

CHAPTER III

CORPSE WITH HIBISCUS



RAMED like an Old Master—framed like a drying curtain. Only I was Saunders McKane of an old Honolulu family now extinct, and the Police knew me from way back and we were friends and we would laugh over this ridiculous situation.

Only with murder you don't laugh. And old friendships dissolve like the morning dew and lots of men go to bed with lots of girls and drink too much and quarrel.

I could leave this place and look up an alibi. I could get the heck out of here, and quickly. Or I could call the Police.

Sick, seemingly drunk, in pajamas—what kind of a story would that be? Only a fool would call the Police.

I went to look for the phone. I found it in the hall off the bedroom and I called the Police Station number, which I knew, and somebody put a hand on my arm.

I probably jumped a couple of feet but I don't remember now. I turned, and looked into the face of Dan Arliss. Faded blue eyes under that upstanding white thatch of hair, the thin face and the high forehead of this medium high slim man. Head of all the detectives in

town. Dan Arliss of the Force.

"We're here, Sandy. You don't need to phone."

"You were here all the—"

"We came a half hour ago but we waited. You were about ready to wake up and we wanted your reaction. That was important, you understand?"

That's why the lights had been on in the bedroom. I was glad now I'd been so noble and full of character and had gone to the phone.

Another figure came out of the darkness of what must have been the living room—Gus Lemke, foil for Dan, errand runner and muscle man and looking like what he was, all detective. Broad and pugnacious.

Dan said, "You know her, Sandy?"

"From her picture. Dolly Valdez, sings and dances at times. Her folks live in Wahiawa."

"You know quite a lot about her."

"I was looking for her for a client."

"Who's the client?"

I shook my head. "Oh, no. Not just yet. I'm a private detective."

Gus Lemke growled, and seemed to move toward me but Dan lifted a restraining hand. "This is murder, Sandy."

"I've seen it before. I've cleaned some cases up before." I felt dizzy again and I put a hand on the wall. "I've worked with you, Dan, before."

He considered this, the pale eyes thoughtful, and then he smiled a little. "All right. I won't throw any law at you right now. You look sick."

"I am sick."

"Maybe he doesn't remember what happened," Lemke said.

I told them all I did remember and I gave them Jefferson Raleigh's name, but not Linda's. Gallantry, you know.

"Where do her folks live?" Dan wanted to know.

"On Kam Highway," I said, "in Wahiawa. There's a bridge right after that road that goes up to Schofield Barracks and they live in the first house across the bridge."

He took it all down.

"And while you're there," I suggested, "you might go to the last house and ask for a lady named Kaipapu. She told me this afternoon that she dreamed Dolly was dead. And that she was in a coffin, covered with hibiscus."

There were men in the bedroom now, including Doc McGuire and his internes and a couple of reporters and a photographer.

Had they all waited until I opened my sleepy eyes? Evidently.

My stomach was uneasy. I told Dan, "If I don't hit the hay pretty soon you can bury me with her."

"Okay," he said. "Your car's outside and you're on Seaside, right next to the Canal."

I looked at him strangely. Seaside, right near the Canal, is where I lived.

I dressed and went out and saw that I was about four houses from home. The car was in front of this house, so whoever had brought me here had probably used that.

It was four o'clock and there was no moon and maybe my unknown and unseen enemies would strike again tonight. But I didn't care. I was very, very tired. I fell asleep as soon as I hit the bed.

[Turn page]



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT!

SAUNDERS McKane, eminent criminologist, student of human nature, lover of women and mixed drinks, sat in his tastefully furnished office feeling like a freighter's keel.

I'd had a good full breakfast and a good small drink. I had walked three times around the block like a fighter in training and I had the window open and was taking deep breaths of the fresh air, hoping it would do me some good. It didn't.

Outside a truck driver was swearing in hearty pidgin but the sound of Dr. Ray Nakamura's drill was blessedly silent. There was a sale on books downstairs, so a lot of women were buying items they wouldn't read or for gifts to friends, so the friends could ignore them.

It was afternoon and not as hot as the day before, though the sun was shining. It was raining a little, a Hawaiian phenomenon. Liquid sunshine, it's called, and very annoying if you're wearing something cottony.

Well, there was Vic Malis. A logical suspect. In his place I'd been drugged. Right outside of his place I'd been picked up. Vic and I would go round and round, getting nowhere.

I went to the window, just for the exercise. Across the street, looking as inconspicuous as he could and probably watching my office, was the mountain who moved like a man, Meat Kozak. He was almost as inconspicuous as the statue of Kamehameha up in Palace Square.

The phone rang and I answered it and it was Linda.

"I read the papers this morning," she said. "The *Advertiser*."

"Yes? Interesting, wasn't it?"

"You didn't mention my name, I see, Saunders."

"Call me Sandy, won't you? I like it better."

"All right, all right. But I wanted to thank you. Couldn't you come out for dinner tonight? I'd like to see you and Dad would, too. You needn't dress."

"Not even in a towel?" I asked.

"I mean—oh, you know what I mean. I remember, you always teased me. But you will come, won't you?"

"Definitely. About eight?"

"Eight will be fine." A pause. "And Sandy—"

"Yes."

"I know you're innocent."

Click of her phone and a dead line and I looked up to meet the gaze of Juan Mira, standing in the doorway. He wore white flannels today, with a fingertip length coat and peg-top trousers. With a blue shirt and a whitish, figured tie and a leghorn hat with a brim big enough for a motorcycle race-track.

I studied his eyes and there was hate in them but not for me, I thought.

"You read the paper this morning?" I said.

He came on into the room. "I read. You know who did this?"

I shook my head. "They tried to frame me for it. That's the way it was but it might not look like a frame to people who don't know me."

He nodded. "I know. Juan not so dumb."

Well, maybe not.

"I owe you some money," I said, "seventy-nine dollars and forty cents. One day's work at twenty slugs per diem and sixty cents worth of gasoline."

He shook his head. "No. You will work for me for a while? Here?" He reached into his inner breast pocket and pulled out his wallet. From it he extracted three hundred-dollar bills. "This is for you, too. I want to know who killed my Dolly."

"I don't know now."

"You will find out. My friends tell me about you."

I motioned him over to the window, and pointed at Meat Kozak. "Is that one of your friends?" I asked him.

The leghorn hat shook negatively. "He used to fight?"

"More or less. Not in any way you'd be likely to remember."

He shrugged. "He's a big man."

I said, "One thing more. It wasn't in the paper but there was a hibiscus in her hand."

He looked like a small, bronze statue for a moment. There was no breath going through his lungs and not a muscle in his body quivered. His eyes were on my face, staring.

He expelled his breath at the same time he said, "Hibiscus?"

"Uh-huh. Spell something to you?"

He shook his head but to clear it, not as an answer to my question. "In the seat of my car I find hibiscus. In my room, one night, on the dresser. Now—"

"A warning?" I said. "Isn't it?"

He nodded like a robot. "Maybe, maybe."

"What's your business, Juan? Not losing fights. That wouldn't even pay for your clothes."

"It is a business others might want. It is something I no tell you. No one can take this from me. My friends are loyal."

"It might help me to find who killed Dolly Valdez."

He was firm on that. "I no tell you."

Okay, he no tell me. He left and I went back to sitting in my chair and wondering if my stomach would stand up under lunch. I'd been putting it off since noon because of the late breakfast and the stomach.

On a sudden whimsical impulse I went to the window and shouted, "Hey, Meat!" and waved for him to come up.

He stood on the curb a moment, staring up in his stupid way, and then he crossed the street, threading through traffic. Downstairs, I could see, women were still coming out, carrying books—literary town, Honolulu.

Meat just about filled the doorway. "You called me?" he asked.

"Sure. If you're going to keep an eye on me you may as well be comfortable. You can sit down up here."

"I wasn't watching you, shamus," he said. "I was waiting for a friend of mine who was buying a book."

"Don't put on airs," I said. "Your friends can't read."

He started to ball one big fist.

"And don't try to scare me. I've seen you fight."

"You're smart," he said. "You're awful smart."

"Only comparatively," I told him. "But this you might as well know. If I'm smart enough to find out who slipped me that Mickey last night there's going to be blood in the streets. There's going to be all kinds of action, all unpleasant. You can carry that back to your well-tailored boss. And buy yourself a clean sport shirt. That one stinks."

HE started to move toward me and I made a motion toward my shoulder as they do in the movies. He stopped.

"Be very careful with me," he said and turned and went out the door.

It was quiet in the office. I wondered what would have happened if he'd kept on coming toward me. All I had on under my jacket was my shirt and under that the lithe, muscular me.

Oh, well, I could have hit him. I could have broken a hand and he could have hit me and broken some other part of me or all the parts of me. I'm so tough and hard bitten—a private detective. I must indulge my whimsies.

Bethel and Merchant is near the docks, and as I stood there a little later, fat Hawaiian ladies were hurrying past, loaded down with leis. That meant a boat was coming in. The odor of the flowers was heavy in the afternoon sun and the rays slanted across the building in front of me. This was the Police Station.

My convertible was parked at the curb and, about six cars back, a Packard convertible was parked, and Meat Kozak sat in that. Which gives you a truer picture of the wages of sin. Mine is no Packard.

Dan Arliss was in his office, smoking one of the brown cigarette-sized cigars he likes for some reason and gazing off into the smoke he was creating. Weary, he looked, and old. I heard the hoot of a tug and the clickety-clack of the typewriter in the next office.

"What's cooking?" I asked.

"She was strangled, of course, neck darn near broken. She and some unknown skinny gent rented the house about a month ago and the owner thought they were man and wife."

"Sure," I said. "He worried about it. He couldn't sleep nights."

"Well, anyway, his name is Walters and he's got an office out on Beretania near the Academy. I was with him for an hour and that's about all I could get out of him."

"You find out anything about those pajamas they draped me in?"

"Nothing yet. Lemke's out on it now. The rest of the clothes were hers. We've got more prints than the F.B.I. have in their files and they'll probably all turn

out to be the iceman's. We've got pictures, about enough for a one man showing, and we've got one suspect." "One?"

"Sure— You. That is, they all have but me. I know you and your kind, gentle ways and your love for butterflies, so that isn't my guess. It's just the rest of the Force and the newspapermen who think that way."

"Well, well," I said. "Hmhhh." Looking profound.

The shock of white hair, wreathed in smoke. The faded eyes looked up at mine. "Want to tell me about your client now?"

"He's paying three hundred dollars to have me find out who killed her. If he gets to him first you'll have another killing."

"Is it ethics or just cussedness that you won't tell me his name?"

"It's privacy. It's what I sell."

"Okay. All right." A weary gesture with the hand. "You're a good boy, Sandy. Someday maybe you too will be strangled and half of my life's burden will be removed." He stomped out the small cigar in an ash trap. "It isn't important anyway. I could always operate an elevator or something."

"Things are tough all over," I said consolingly.

"Beat it," he said. "Go and get drunk. go fishing, go relax on the beach at Waikiki."

"Aloha," I said and left.

Outside, in the Packard, Meat made a ritual of lighting a cigarette. For this he cupped his hands in front of his face and thus I couldn't see him. He wasn't so dumb—no dumber than a young ape.

I drove out to Waikiki and home—to my little one story stucco job near the canal, needing only a heap of living and the feminine touch to make it truly home.

NEXT ISSUE

MURDER THROWS A RINGER

A Dwight Berke Novelet

By CARL G. HODGES

AND OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND CORPSE



In this place of unparalleled elegance I prepared for my social evening. I looked out the living room window first and Meat was nowhere in sight.

I went back into my kitchen and made a cheese sandwich and some coffee. I ate and drank this and took a shower, hot, and a shower, cold, and then I relaxed on the bed a while, smoking and thinking. But the thinking led up nothing but blind alleys. I set the alarm for seven and took a nap.

At seven-thirty I was dressed and at seven-forty I was outside. I thought I saw a light in the house that had held the body of Dolly Valdez. But it didn't appear again and I figured I must have been wrong.

The Ramsay home was on the Diamond Head Road, or just off of it. As I drove up Kalakaua past the beach I could see the bright new moon on the water and the swimmers and, far out, silhouetted, a surfboard rider coming in. Like a picture postcard. A nice, romantic night.

The Ramsay home was flat and white and rambling with a red-tile roof and the broad low front of it was *makai*, as they say, or towards the sea. The rear was towards the mountains or *mauka*. (Little bits of knowledge about our happy Polynesian neighbors.) The entire broad front backed the open flagstone lanai and, it seemed, was composed of glass, two stories high, affording a view of all that part of the Pacific.

I drove up the back drive, a road of crushed lava between slanting palms and a hibiscus hedge which walled in a section of the rear lawn. Then I was swinging around the front of the house within sight of the sea.

From the lanai I could see into the two-story living room and Linda was standing there in the middle of that impressive expanse of glass. She waved away a maid who was coming to answer the door and came herself.

She had her hair high and was wearing a nifty white-and-flowered dress

and had a flower in her hair, a gardenia. With the moon it was almost too much.

"I see you didn't wear the towel," she said.

In white linen upper I was, and cocoabrown congo-cloth lower, with white shirt and garish tie. Who cares?

"Golly, you're beautiful," I said.

"Hmph," she said, "what are you selling?"

Into a reception room with tiled floor I was led and from there into the living room and I wondered if the architect hadn't forgotten the ticket windows and the PA system and the information desk. There were Sarouks on the floor in here, the only old note in the modern air of the place.

Curtis Ramsay, of the Ramsay Sugar interests but more noted as the father of Linda, was here in this room, getting up from a mammoth white leather chair to shake my capable hand.

A very ordinary looking man, except for the eyes, which had Linda's depth and blueness. Medium height and medium width and medium coloring and maybe a little more than medium sharp. More than a little maybe.

A lot of needlework and inspired cutting had gone into the blue suit he wore but it was wasted for some reason.

We talked of old times and old faces and future hopes. Then dinner was served and we went into the dining room. A Kerman was on the floor in here and a large family must have sweated a good part of its lives away on that baby. It was almost as large as the dining room.

It was about halfway through the meal when I asked Linda, "What'd that lad look like who drove me away last night?"

Her eyes went a little wide. "Don't you know him? He said it was something he'd done before and I thought—"

"At the risk of boring you with my virtues," I said, "I don't get drunk and rarely get sick, so the man was lying. I drink but don't get drunk for some reason. Last night I was drugged."

"I hoped so," Linda said.

Which didn't make sense at first, and then it did and I gave her my warm, secret, we-share-a-future smile.

"He was short," she told me. "Shorter

than I am at any rate. And he was round, a regular rolypoly, and he had the kindest, roundest, merriest face you can imagine."

"Make a good Santa Claus around Christmas time," I said, "and save his strangling for the rest of the year."

"Sandy," she said, "you don't think he—"

"No," I told her, "I don't think one way or the other on him. Excepting that he was in it, as one of the stooges probably. How about this Jefferson Raleigh?"

CURTIS (sugar magnate) Ramsay answered that one. "He works for me," he said. "Fine lad."

Linda nodded in agreement. "A nice boy." Looking at me. "What made you think of him?"

"My jealous nature probably," I said and I was probably right.

We were finishing dinner when Mr. Ramsay got the phone call, which seemed to be urgent, because he asked to be excused, and he did hope I wouldn't think him rude.

Which left me alone with Linda. And that certainly couldn't be construed as rudeness even in my own highly correct gold book of social behavior.

"Would you like to go for a swim?" Linda suggested. "There are some trunks upstairs I'm sure you could wear."

It seemed like a good idea and she called the maid and had her bring the trunks and show me where to dress. This was the guest room in the back and I could see the road from here and it looked to me as if there was a big man sitting in the Packard convertible parked out there on the road. But there are lots of Packard convertibles on the island and quite a few big men.

Linda wore a white, pure-white, swimming suit. She was slim, all right, but not in any of the wrong places.

She could swim like a porpoise. The water is always warm so there's no danger of cramps but there is an undertow along this section of private beach. It didn't bother her and I started swimming when I was three, so we swam way out.

Then we swam back and sat on the

sand and smoked and looked out at the moon on the water and watched the breakers rolling in. To the west we could see the lights of Waikiki and the public beach but they seemed far away.

"What happened to Tommy Rice?" I asked her.

The blue eyes were startled as they had a right to be. "Nothing," she said finally. "That's a strange question."

"Tactless, too," I said, "but I was wondering, because—" And I said no more.

She was laughing, now, quietly. "No broken heart if that's what you mean. We grew up together and then outgrew each other."

"Like that, huh?"

"Like that." Looking up at me, faintly wondering.

And I was looking down at her and wondering too. Her lips parted a little, the moon was in her eyes and I kissed her. There was some slight response, no denial anyway.

"Well," I said.

"Well?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just me, Sandy McKane, private eye at twenty a day when I get it, and a windfall here and there, and Linda Ramsay. Different leagues and it doesn't matter that you're as important to me as either or both of my arms."

"You talk too much," she said, "but if it helps you think go ahead."

The moon, looking down, was laughing.

"How about you?" I asked.

"Before that first party and since," she said. "Always in my mind like a tune you can't forget, Saunders McKane."

"Called Sandy."

"So called."

I kissed her again and the response was more than slight this time. I'll bet the moon stopped laughing.

"It's ridiculous," I said. "It's impossible, of course."

"Naturally," she said, "there wouldn't be movies if it weren't."

I said nothing.

"Linda McKane," she said. "That sounds all right don't you think."

"It sounds," I said, "a lot better than it would be."

Philosopher in borrowed trunks on the beach, looking stern.

At twelve the moon was still shining and I was driving slowly down the crushed lava road between the palms. There was no Packard parked there now, on the highway.

Down Kalakaua to Seaside and down Seaside. There was a light on in that house for sure this time—in the back, where the bedroom was. I drove past and pulled in to my own drive and walked back. There was a light on in the front room now and, very visible from the street, the short squat figure of Juan Mira.

I went up and rang the bell, and Juan came to the door. "You're taking a big chance," I told him, "coming around here. There's probably a cop watching us right now."

"I want to see this place," Juan said. "I want to see how she live."

"She lived here at least part of the time for at least a month," I said. "You told me she'd only been missing a week."

"For two weeks, two Saturdays I am in Hilo, two fights. When I come back she is there at the hotel. Juan no suspect."

"And something else," I said. "When she worked at the Hula Hut and Jerome's you kicked. But you practically made them give her that job at the Pikaki Room. Why?"

"Long time ago, Pikaki Room. She no love Juan then. I make play, get her job. Later she love Juan. Sabe now?"

"Okay," I said, "but get out of here quick. The police are just looking for a number-two boy, and you'd do."

He looked around the living room sadly and back toward the bedroom. "You catch him soon, I hope," he said angrily.

"I'm no closer than I was this morning," I said, "and no brighter."

ONLY a little more in love, I thought, and perhaps a little more unhappy, though I hadn't been exactly joyous this morning.

I slept fairly well that night—because of the swim, no doubt.

I was at the office bright and early and the sound of Dr. Ray Nakamura's drill was muffled but busy. A little Jap boy came along the hall, holding on to

his mother's hand. Maybe it wasn't his mother. He looked scared and sick and the woman was worried.

They disappeared into the office of Dr. Ray.

There was a kid in the doorway then, older than the one who was going to the dentist. This lad was about seventeen and he was barefoot. He was the captain of my own stalwart crew, the Barefoot Boys.

You'll find them all around town, on all the downtown corners—and in the pool halls, and in trouble, generally. Barefoot, all of them. The police call them 'juvenile delinquents' and the papers 'young hoodlums' but I just call them the Barefoot Boys. Pollyanna Sandy McKane, incipient secretary, Y.M.C.A.

This one in my office was about as close to pure Hawaiian as they come. He was a good lad over a pool table and he made a fine figure on a surf board. Out at the Waialae golf course he cad-died for me occasionally and gave me a few pointers.

"I'm glad you dropped in," I said. "I've got a job for the gang, I think."

His black face split in a toothy grin and he rubbed his thumb against his forefinger.

"How much?"

"Later," I said and went to work, composing the list and looking up addresses, business and home.

WHEN I was finished I handed it to him. "All you can get on all of them," I said.

"Pay now?"

I shook my head. "I did that once, remember? Pay later."

He went quietly out and down the hall. From the dentist's office came the sound of the drill and a whimper. The drill stopped a moment, then continued. I had a wisdom tooth that really needed pulling. But it could wait. I was too busy.

I went to the window and looked out. The big man was not in sight but there was a Packard parked across the street, a Packard convertible.

I studied my nails and hummed a little and went over to the ice chest and my little cupboard. Lots of powdered sugar

left, plenty of gin—I made a Tom Collins. I phoned Dan Arliss, and asked him if Lemke had turned up anything on the pajamas. Lemke hadn't.

"How about that guy who drove me over there? Get any leads on that?"

"This town," Dan said caustically, "is loaded with little, skinny men who wear caps. It might take some time if you don't mind?"

I hung up slowly, trying to figure that one out and there was only one way to figure it. I went to the phone book again. But if he was a workingman—Well, I'd try.

JEFFERSON RALEIGH lived on Bere-tania near the Academy of Arts and near the realty office of the man named Walters. Walters' first name was Bruce and his office and home were combined.

I drove past to the apartment house where Jefferson Raleigh lived. In the hall of this small apartment building there were four mailboxes and four bell buttons.

I pressed the button belonging to Raleigh's apartment.

There was no answer.

A Japanese woman came through the door above, carrying a pail and a mop. Did she, I asked, have keys for all the apartments?

She nodded, looking at me doubtfully. I pulled the quick flash with my badge and tried to sound like a headquarters man.

"I have to get in there immediately. Lead the way."

It worked. She didn't even hesitate but hurried ahead of me through the door and up the stairs to the apartment on the right. She unlocked the door wordlessly and stepped aside for me to enter.

It was a furnished apartment, cheaply furnished. There was a pull-up chair, unoccupied, and a faded overstuffed chair, which was occupied.

The occupant had curly blond hair and a blond mustache and there was the handle of a knife protruding from his throat. Jefferson Raleigh was quite dead.

In his right hand, he held a hibiscus, of the color called apricot, which is one of the many.

CHAPTER V

ROLY-POLY MAN

 HE Japanese woman made some strangled sound in her throat and I turned to her swiftly.

"Get the manager. *Wiki-wiki.*" Which means hastily. She left and I went to the phone and called the Station. Then I went over the place as thoroughly as I could in a hurry but found nothing that would do me any good.

Dan Arliss was the first one there though Lemke wasn't far behind. And Doc McGuire. They got there even before the manager, who came in looking sick.

Dan said something unprintable, looking from me to the body of Raleigh and back again. The manager was chattering something incoherent and Lemke was looking more pugnacious than ever.

It was a pleasant little tableau and it looked as if they had me picked for the heavy. I told them the way it was.

"Why'd you come here?" Dan asked.

"Because he told you the man who picked me up was thin. And I had it on better authority that he was fat. And I wanted to know why he lied."

"Sure. So he didn't answer the bell but you're in here."

"I thought there might be something here that would give me a tip-off, and I got the maid to let me in. I was going to give it a once-over lightly and—"

"That's breaking and entering. We throw guys in the can for that. You know that, huh?"

"I'm on a murder case," I said evenly. "The ethics of the thing maybe didn't bother me as they should."

"You're on a murder case," Dan said, "and I'm on a merry-go-round—because you're on a murder case."

"Why argue with the guy, Dan?" Lemke questioned. "Let's throw him in the jug."

"Sure," I said, "why not? Put Lemke on it. He's bright."

"You don't want no trouble with me," Lemke said. "Stay in line, boy."

"You haven't got any trouble for me," I said. "Any time you think you have,

for money, marbles or chalk, I'm ready." Lemke sized me up and thought of something to say and then changed his mind. I'd had about enough from him to last me a long time.

"Any time you think you've got troubles, you could try it alone, like I'm doing, without the monthly check, and without the pension," I told Dan. "And if you want to put me in the can, either as a material witness or as a suspect, do it. Don't just talk about it. I don't give the tiniest hoot either way."

"All right." Dan's voice was weary. "I'll think it over. Hang around. Hang around out in the hall."

I stayed out there while Doc McGuire finished his job and they took the body out, while Dan quizzed the manager, while the print man and the photographer and the newspapermen handled their part of it. All alone, out in the hallway, I was alone with my thoughts.

Dan and Lemke came out finally. On a hunch, I said, "Why not take this Walters, this realtor, down to look at Raleigh's body?"

Dan looked at me quizzically. "You think, maybe he's the guy that Valdez dame was—"

"Maybe," I said. "Just a guess." Just an unreasonable tie-up in my mind. I could have said it was because of the proximity of this apartment to the realty office.

Dan was looking thoughtful. "All right. How about this hibiscus? You got any ideas on that?"

"Looks like a warning, doesn't it? Unless the killer is crazy. The only sensible answer is that it's a warning."

"Which would bring in the rackets," Dan said. "Some kind of racket."

I nodded.

"And your client."

"You're guessing," I told him. "We're not going to start that all over again, are we?"

Lemke was saying nothing, which was a blessing. Dan studied the floor and looked back into the apartment and back to me.

"I'll see you later. Drop in this afternoon."

"Sure," I said—and, "Who phoned the other night and tipped you off to Dolly Valdez' death?"

Dan shrugged. "Some man. He didn't leave a name. We tried to check up but we couldn't."

He left then and I left. I drove slowly back to the office. Dan's car, I saw as I was going past, was parked in front of the realtor's office—the man named Walters who had thought they were man and wife, Dolly and her new friend.

Back to Hotel Street and the snug confines of my home away from home. Back to make another drink and to call up Juan Mira on the phone.

I TOLD him about the death of Jefferson Raleigh, and the hibiscus in his hand.

"Want to come down and talk to me about it?" I asked.

"Why I come down? I no know him."

Why, indeed? "I thought perhaps you could have some information that would help."

He didn't have.

"Your name hasn't come into this," I told him, "and I'll try to see that it doesn't. But the Police aren't happy about my being such a gentleman."

"I no want the Police in my business."

Nor me, evidently. I had no more words for him. I didn't seem to be earning the three hundred dollars. I surely wouldn't earn it sitting around here. I went out and walked down Hotel Street to the Hula Hut.

The same girl was coming out of the water in the mural behind the bar. She still wore the same reflective look. Whether or not it was the same bartender I didn't know. So I asked him.

He nodded. "Sure. Why?"

"Somebody slipped me a Mickey."

"Not me," he said, "What were you drinking?"

"Ladies' Aid."

"That could do it."

"Not to me," I said.

He shrugged. "You're wasting your time."

"I'd like to talk to Vic," I said.

"What's your name?"

"McKane, Sandy McKane."

He walked the length of the bar and came out from behind it, walked through the deserted dining room to the deserted bandstand and around that to the office behind it.

In less than a minute he was on his way back. "Vic'll see you," he said. "His office is behind the stage."

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you kindly."

He said nothing—nothing I could hear anyway. The office was small, paneled in koa wood. Vic was sitting behind a green steel desk and he didn't get up as I entered.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"Jefferson Raleigh was killed. The police just found his body. Or rather I did."

Interest showed in the face all right. The name spelled something. "What's your angle, Sandy?"

"A case. A piece of business. You seem to be getting in the way. I come here, get drugged. Get picked up outside and darn near framed. Your big boy with the little mind is haunting me." I was building myself up to a peeve. "You wouldn't expect me to steer clear

[Turn page]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 prints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of

pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will keep the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(40c.)

of you after all that, would you?"

"Lots do," he said.

"Maybe you frighten them."

"Maybe." He studied a paper on his desk. He looked up. "I'm no scoutmaster. It's no secret to you that I might even be outside the law."

"Well?"

"Lots of people in this town outside the law. Some of them I get along with and some I don't."

"I'm still listening."

He lighted up a cigar, studied the end for a moment and then went on, "You're working for Juan or you were the other night when you came in. Maybe you've switched over to the Police by now, in which case I could clam up. But there are some things I want you to understand."

I lit a cigarette without studying the end.

"I didn't drug you or have you drugged," he explained. "I didn't have you picked up or framed. You can believe that or not—this time it happens to be true. Somebody would like to have it look like I'm doing these things. Maybe Mira, though we've got no reason to fight. There's plenty of business for both of us."

"And the big boy who's living in my hair?"

"I'll call him off."

"Sure. But why is he haunting me now?"

He waited too long to answer. He waited long enough to make up an answer.

"I thought you were nosing into something else. I found out you're not."

A random thought hit me and made sense but I didn't give it a voice. "Jefferson Raleigh worked for you, didn't he?" I asked.

He took a little time on that one, too. "No," he answered.

Which was a lie, of course, or he wouldn't have taken any time.

"Maybe Juan's business is being cut into," I said.

"Not by me. I've got all I can handle. All my protection will cover."

That protection sentence was a phony, to scare me, to get the upper hand. All his protection came in holsters.

BUT he didn't scare me. And it was a sure thing I didn't scare him enough to be noticeable.

I went to the door. "I hope we don't have to tangle," I said.

"I hope so too," he said but his voice was flat. He wasn't going to lose any sleep about that.

Outside traffic was going by and a little brown kid was trying to sell a shoe shine to a round and roly-poly kind of man who was lounging near the awning over Vic's cellar entrance. This man had the merriest, kindest face you can imagine. I was in a bad mood.

I went over to stand about an inch away from him and I put my ugliest scowl on my face.

"Strangle anybody lately, junior?" I asked. "Take any drunks home?"

There was honest and startled surprise in the roly-poly face of the roly-poly man. "I, sir," he said, "am a full professor of botany at the University of Hawaii. Is there anything I can do for you?"

I took a big gulp of air and closed my eyes. I opened them. I said meekly, "Could you tell me the color hibiscus don't come in."

"Blue of course," he said, "though many able men are working on that, too. It might not be long before we have blue hibiscus."

I could hardly wait. I thanked him gently and walked quietly away. Three thousand varieties of hibiscus—but no blue.

It wasn't afternoon yet but I drove over to the Police Station, and Dan was there in the office, making smoke.

"Well?" I said.

"Dolly's pal," he admitted. "Walters was sure about that. For a chubby little Filipino she did all right, didn't she?"

"Yup." He wasn't watching me. "Still hot?" I said.

He turned around in his chair and his quiet tired eyes came up to meet mine. "Nobody likes to get told off in front of subordinates. No cop likes to get told off by a citizen. But maybe I had it coming. Next time be a little more respectful."

"Right. I was a little unnerved."

There was a question in his eyes but he didn't want to voice it. I said, "If I don't crack this thing in forty-eight

hours, you can have my client. I won't only give you his name, I'll drag him in here and sit him in your lap. I'm getting a little fed up with him myself."

"Okay." Then, "You've got your boys working again, haven't you? Your young hoodlums?"

"Maybe," I said and laughed.

"People are complaining. One old lady found one of them in the back of her car when she came back from marketing and she passed right out."

"They're active," I admitted. "I'll tone them down." Just words, to make sound in a quiet place. Then, "Anything else you'd like me to know now that we're friends again?"

"Nothing. And we're not exactly holding hands yet. Remember that. You get a lot of freedom around this town, Sandy."

"That's what I like about it," I said. "That and the remarkable efficiency of this alert, progressive Department."

"Beat it," he said. "Go some place where they like you."

"All doors are open to me," I told him, "because of my charming nature."

"Find one," he said. "Go find one. *Wikiwiki.*" Which means quickly as I've told you before.

One place I'm always welcome because of my promptness with the rent is my office. So I went there.

I considered mixing a drink but if I mixed many more today I would be well on the path to becoming a lush. So I resisted the temptation. I sat and thought of Linda but that didn't get me anywhere either. So I stopped thinking about Linda. I tried anyway.

I picked up the phone and called Juan. He was in and I told him that the man who had been killed this morning was the man who had shared the house with his Dolly.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. Finally his voice came matter-of-factly. "I glad he dead. You kill him?"

"No."

"Well, I glad he dead."

Which was about all he had to say this sunny day. Glib, articulate Juan Mira, always talking, always chattering away.

I went back to thinking about Linda—About her hair and the cool firm slim-

ness of her and her lack of pose and her straightness. I thought of her wearing a blue apron and standing in the doorway of my little stucco castle. First in a yellow apron, then in a green one, but none of them looked natural to me. They looked like something out of a woman's magazine.

I put together what I had. Linda I'd met at Vic's place. And Raleigh was working for Mr. Ramsay and probably for Vic. Juan was being warned but two murders had gone into that and why hadn't they just had one murder, Juan's? It would have served the same purpose.

One reason I could think of—Juan was popular with the Filipinos, a sort of minor god. If anything happened to him personally this town would rock. Well, that was one. Another was that Juan had customers, a customer list or a customer loyalty, and they needed that.

If it was customers I could guess at the product. It's quite a business with our population.

Which brought me back to the Ramseys, father and daughter, and what was papa's part in this? In it he was by what little I had so far. Maybe, later, he'd be cleared—I hoped.

The phone rang and I answered it and it was Dan Arliss' dry voice. "I just got a tip you were jealous of this Raleigh guy. Anything in it?" A sort of chuckle but without humor.

"Sure," I said, "that's why I bumped him. Who was responsible for the information?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew," Dan said. "I've got to protect our citizens."

He hung up. I wasn't doing any good here. I went down to the little convertible.

CHAPTER VI

RED HIBISCUS



R. Ramsay's offices were out on Dillingham Boulevard but Curtis Ramsay wasn't there this morning. He was out at the house his secretary told me—which was where I didn't want to go.

It was close to noon so I stopped in Waikiki to eat, and I took my

time. Getting to the Ramsay house at lunchtime would maybe put me at a disadvantage.

Then I was driving slowly up the Diamond Head Road and turning slowly in at the drive. When I got to the front of the house I could see a figure in a white bathing suit, down at the beach and I think she was looking my way, but I didn't wave.

A maid came to the door and I gave her my name and told her my desire. She went back to see if Mr. Curtis Ramsay cared to see me this morning.

He evidently did and she ushered me into the glass-fronted room a little later.

Curtis Ramsay was wearing gray this morning and this suit had about the same effect the blue one had had, which was none. He was sitting in the same white leather chair and he rose as he had the evening before. The same mechanical smile was on his face.

I asked, "Any of the servants likely to be within hearing distance?"

He was motionless a moment and then he shook his head. He pulled up another chair, close to the leather one, and I sat in that.

"One of your employees was murdered," I opened. "Man named Jefferson Raleigh."

His eyes were on my face with nothing in them. "Well?"

"He also worked for Vic Malis. You know Vic?"

He nodded. "I know who he is."

"He work for you too?"

No anger came to the face but he was very watchful. He was being very careful.

"What are you getting at?"

"I don't know myself," I said. "Somebody called the police this morning and told them I was jealous of Jefferson Raleigh. I said that here last night in jest."

He tried to put some indignation into his voice but it was phony. "What is the purpose of this ridiculous conversation?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I came up here for information but maybe you haven't got any. Or any you want to give me."

I rose, ready to leave. He was looking at me and he thought for a moment of

stopping me. Of that I was sure. But he didn't. His eyes were still on me and they were thoughtful. I turned and went out and I could feel them on my back until I left the room.

Linda was out there, on the flagstone lanai. She was in the white swimming suit. "Hey, snob, who do you think you're ignoring?" she asked.

"Whom," I corrected her.

She wrinkled her nose.

I said, "I'm sure your dad doesn't want you to talk to me. Go in and see."

I went down to the car, got in and started the motor and drove away. When I turned the corner she was still standing on the lanai, staring.

I drove down the Diamond Head Road to where it joined Kalakaua. There's a little jog here and I parked so I could watch the traffic both ways.

All kinds of traffic went by—cars, big and little, driven by people of both sexes—of Chinese ancestry and Korean and Japanese and Filipino, of Portuguese, white and black and *haole*—which is white—and *hapahaole*—which is half white. There were all kinds of other hapas, and all kinds of mixtures, the arithmetical possibility of the current strains being 127 if you're interested.

Then a black Lincoln convertible with the top down went by, making time. Vic Malis was behind the wheel.

I started my car and drove slowly back to the office. There I mixed a good strong drink and sat in my chair, sulking.

It was quiet in the office with no sound of the drill. From outside came a little traffic noise but it was muffled up here as though from far away. I heard heavy feet coming down the hall and they turned in at my door. I looked up to see the bulk of Meat Kozak filling the doorway.

He came all the way in and closed the door behind him and locked it. He had a clean sport shirt on today. He walked right over to me, and stood there on the other side of the desk.

"Why don't you leave Vic alone?"

I started to get up and one big hand came over to sit me down again. It was a casual gesture but it jarred me. My shoulder hurt.

"Vic ain't bothering you and there's

no reason you should be bothering him, see? You gonna lay off?"

I shook my head. His big hand came around with surprising speed and slapped me out of my chair. My ear was ringing when I got up off the floor.

He was standing over me and started a right hand. I put all I had into a right to beat him to it. I was flat-footed and I had my weight in it and it connected. I could feel pain all the way up to my shoulder. His own right landed somewhere along my jaw and the roof fell in. . . .

WHEN my eyes opened again, my door was open and Dr. Ray Nakamura, in starchy white, was bending over me. In the doorway a little Japanese boy stood with a white towel fastened as a bib.

"Shall I call the Police?" Nakamura wanted to know. I shook my head.

"Private battle," I said. It hurt to talk.

He went out, looking doubtful, taking his curious customer with him. I straightened my upset chair and sat in it, rubbing my jaw. My right hand was swelling up but I didn't think anything was broken.

I sat there a long time, feeling sorry for myself and not thinking of anything much that was coherent.

Some time later the phone rang. It was Linda's voice and would I be in the office all afternoon? I said I would. She would be down as quickly as she could get here.

I sat, waiting, rubbing my jaw and watching my hand, which was dark now between the first two knuckles but which had stopped swelling. I was faintly sick to my stomach. I didn't want a drink.

Linda wore kelly-green shantung, which did things for her. And to me. I got up and motioned to a chair. She took it.

"Why were you up at the house this morning, Sandy?" she asked.

"To see your dad."

"He's in trouble, isn't he?"

"What makes you think so?"

"A little while after you left Vic Malis came up to the house and Dad took him back to his study in the rear."

I smiled. "You listened."

Her blue eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"Didn't you?"

"I did. I couldn't hear all of it, just enough to know that Vic and Dad must have been in business together. Dad said he was through, that Vic could have the whole filthy mess. What did he mean by that, Sandy?"

"He means that they aren't going to be partners any more. I can't be sure about the business."

"Is it that liquor—?"

One of the by-products of the Ramsay sugar interests was liquor from cane. Excellent stuff for removing the enamel from your teeth. Some people even drink it. Filipinos even relish it.

"No," I said, "it isn't the liquor. That's a crime but not illegal. Only against reason and taste."

"You're not being flippant, are you?" she said.

"Maybe I was. I'm sorry, Linda. What I'm on is a murder case. Maybe your dad's mixed up in it, and maybe he isn't. That's all I've got right now."

"Is this going to make any difference between us?"

I shook my head. "The only thing that would change that situation would be my coming into a couple million dollars. The possibilities of that are very remote."

She rose, her face frozen. She said, "It would be your decision," and left.

I could hear her heels clicking down the hallway. I went to the window and saw her leave the building entrance. Across the street a little fat man was lounging. When Linda came out he turned his back and pretended to be absorbed in the show window behind him. When she was out of sight he turned around again.

I couldn't see from here whether he had the roundest, kindest face imaginable or not. I could see it wasn't the full professor of botany. Maybe it was an assistant professor but I didn't think so.

I took my .38 out of the drawer and put it in the pocket of my Palm Beach suit, wrinkled. I went down the stairs and outside and looked across the street. He was gone.

I went back up, feeling faintly foolish. But I took off my jacket and put on my shoulder harness and put the .38 in that.

I sat there for a while, hating the world and wondered what time my barefoot boy would show up. I mixed a drink finally and drank it, not worrying if I was becoming a lush or not.

My phone rang some aeons later and I answered it. It was Linda again and she said, "I found a red hibiscus in the seat of my car. What does it mean, Sandy?"

"It means you shouldn't go anywhere without a cop. You had better phone them right away, right now."

When I put the phone back on the cradle I was sweating but I wasn't hot. A kid was selling papers down below and I waved for him to come up and bought one.

The new hibiscus murder was all over page one and the hibiscus angle was given lots of ink, but Sandy McKane was not mentioned by name. Jefferson Raleigh, the paper said, had held a responsible position in Ramsay Sugar and there was no known motive for his death.

Which meant that the police had soft-pedaled the house-sharing angle or the papers had. None of it made sense. Maybe it was Dan's idea.

I spent some more time feeling owly. I went to the window but the lounger's heaven was vacant. I went out to supper.

CHAPTER VII

DEAD IN THE NIGHT



FTER supper I came back to the office and my boy was there, holding a handful of notes written in pencil and looking greedy.

"How much?" he said.

"Let's see them."

He handed them over and I looked through them hastily.

Then I said, "How much?"

"Twenty," he said.

I gave him two fives and a ten. "See that the other boys get a cut for a change," I said. "I don't want them heckling me."

"Sure," he said. "Of course." At the doorway he turned and said, "Aloha," and then I heard the pad of his feet in the hall.

There was something here. There was a farm Juan had gone to that afternoon and the name of an importer Vic had gone to and an address Meat had gone to and lots of things that weren't any help at all.

The farm, I decided, could wait until tomorrow. I went downstairs and climbed into my busy little car.

I went down King, going north, and the smell of fish from the markets blanketed the air. Across from the markets, there were some ramshackle buildings. One of them was called the T. Y. Young Importing Company and the door was open. I pushed in.

The place was lofty and piled high with merchandise. It smelled of tea and camphor and perfume and dust. Toward the back there was a light coming from the glass doorway of a little walled-in corner office. I went back to the door and knocked.

There was a Chinese in there, round and placid, wearing a black silk, or silky, suit and a jade ring I could see from the doorway. He was sitting at a desk and he beckoned me in.

I came in and told him who I was and went through the business of flashing my badge, hoping it would frighten him. His smooth face didn't lose any of its placidity. His eyes were dreamy, out of this world, and I thought I detected a sweetish odor among the others.

"You do business through Vic Malis, don't you?" I asked.

His hands were folded over his big middle, the jade ring very much in evidence. "Maybe," he said.

"Cocaine? Heroin? Opium?"

His head moved slowly in the negative. "Fish."

"Vic doesn't sell fish," I said.

"Doesn't he?" Not that he was interested, his face said.

"You've been reading too many stories about the enigmatic, shrewd Oriental," I told him. "The heat's on and you won't find the clink any more pleasant just because you're not talkative."

"What do you want?" he asked. "You want to buy something?"

"I want some cooperation," I said.

"Why? Who are you? Sandy McKane with the big nose. You are not the Police. With the Police I cooperate."

"Okay," I said. "I'll call them." And I reached for the phone on his desk.

He didn't move at first. I called the Police Station number and his hand gestured and, when they answered, I asked if it was the Bishop National Bank. It wasn't and I put the phone back.

"All right," I said, "I imagine that movement of your hand meant something."

"What do you want?" he said.

"I want to know if Vic's the only one you work for. I don't give a hoot about your business. I can guess it by your eyes. But has anybody been trying to sell you something else?"

He nodded. "A little round man, used to work for Vic."

"What'd he try to sell you?"

"In the same line. A cheap product."

"He doesn't work for Vic any more?"

The negative movement, slow.

"You know his name?"

"No. I never knew it, even before."

"Is it what Juan Mira sells?" I asked.

His big shoulders moved slightly. "Might be."

I left him to his dreams then and went through the big room of many smells and out to the fish smell.

I had another address not far from here and I went over there. I parked about a block away and walked the rest. There was a rooming house here, an unpainted wooden structure that called itself the Queen Hotel but hadn't been that for a long time. The fish odor carried over here.

THREE was a slovenly hapa-Hawaiian woman in what had once been the lobby but was now her quarters. I asked her if she had as a tenant the rolypoly man. She thought she had but he wasn't in.

I went out again and, in the yard of the house next door, there was a hibiscus shrub with red hibiscus blooming on the shrub. No one seemed to be around. I sneaked over and broke off a blossom.

I went back to the rooming house, and gave it to the landlady. "Give this to him when he comes in," I said. "It's just a joke but he'll understand. He'll appreciate it."

She looked puzzled and then she began to look a little scared. She probably read

the papers. But she assured me he would get it.

I went back and brought the car a little closer, and turned on the radio and waited. A sailor went by, drunk, and a sailor went by, sober. Both of them turned into the rooming house. Your guess as to why is as good as mine.

Some other assorted characters turned into the rooming house, but none of them stayed much more than ten minutes, including the sailors. This was just like River Street.

Somebody was strumming a guitar somewhere and singing something about not finding another kanaka like him. Maybe she didn't want to.

In about a half hour a car stopped in front of the rooming house, a Chevy coupe, and a little round man got out of it and went up the walk and disappeared through the door. I cut off the radio and waited.

The little round man came out, moving hurriedly, and climbed into the Chevy. I kicked my car into life. The Chevy started with a shudder, batting over toward King. I wasn't far behind. Just far enough not to be noticeable.

Up King I trailed him to Bethel, and up Bethel to Hotel and down Hotel to the Hula Hut. Here he parked and went in. I parked not too far behind and waited. I waited a long time and nothing happened. Some customers went in and a few customers came out—but not the round man.

I felt the weight of my .38 under my jacket and the heft of it was reassuring. I got out of the car and over to the entrance of the Hula Hut. I went down the stairs and in.

At a table not too far from the bar Curtis Ramsay and Vic Malis were in earnest and quiet conversation. There was no sign of the rolypoly man.

I ordered a drink and looked the place over carefully and considered asking the bartender some questions. But he wasn't too agreeable a type.

I went out and up the stairs again and the Chevy was gone. I cursed quietly and with some fluency and went back to the car and waited.

Some time later, Curtis Ramsay came out alone and I blew the horn and opened the door of my car. He walked over.

"Feeling like talking any more now?" I asked him.

His shoulders sagged, and the face he lifted to mine was heavy with fatigue. He was a beaten man. "Where?" he asked.

"In my office. It's right up the street."

He climbed into the car without saying a word. I drove the few blocks to my office. We went up the steps together to my office. He took the chair on the other side of the desk and asked me, "What do you want to know?"

"About Raleigh and Dolly Valdez."

"I wish I knew. My daughter got one of those hibiscus today. Did you know that?"

I nodded.

"It's my fault I suppose—getting myself into the mess I have but I didn't think she would ever—" He broke off, and ran a tired hand over his face. He looked about ready for a collapse.

"Sugar business bad?" I asked him.

"You know what income taxes are," he asked me, "for a man in my income bracket?"

"I can guess."

"Terrific," he said. "I'm not trying to blame anybody but myself, but there wasn't enough left, not enough for all I wanted. And there was this easy way to make it with a market crying for stuff, according to Vic, and all he needed was a little money. Not a lot to start with, though we went into bigger money later. None of it I would need to declare."

"Dope," I said. "Opium."

"I'm not saying," he told me.

"Raleigh?"

"Worked for us, knew the markets, handled the women."

"You let your daughter go with him."

"No. She met him at the house one day and he did the rest. I told her I didn't favor it and she didn't care for him particularly. So there wasn't much danger, there."

"How about this little round man, the rolypoly one? Do you know who he is?"

He shook his head wearily. I couldn't feel any particular sympathy for him. Not for anyone who made money out of the drug racket.

"Do you think Linda is in serious danger?" he asked me.

"I suppose she is. You have some pro-

tection up at the house?"

He nodded. "Police."

He had no more answers that would do me any good—excepting that he hadn't told the police I might be jealous of Raleigh. After he left I sat for awhile in the office, thinking of nothing much. My jaw was all right and the swelling in my hand had gone down. The bruise between the first and second knuckles was still evident though.

I went to bed early and tossed for a long time. It was a bad night.

In the morning paper I read that Curtis Ramsay of the Ramsay sugar interests had died in the night. He had taken (by mistake, the paper said) an overdose of sleeping tablets.

CHAPTER VIII

LONG ENOUGH



ATE at home and went directly out to this farm the next morning. It was out beyond Waipahu, off the Farrington Highway, and I would know it, the note said, by an enormous banyan tree in the front yard.

I found it and turned up the rutted drive. There were two or three small houses here and some Filipino kids playing in the strip of lawn between the houses. The house facing the road must be the one Juan Mira had gone to the day before because the banyan tree was directly in front of it.

I knocked on the front door.

There was some conversation inside in one of the Filipino dialects and then a thin, sallow Filipino woman opened the door. "I'm a friend of Juan's," I said, "and he sent me out to look the place over."

The woman looked doubtful and I didn't blame her. She called something in the language to the man in the room with her and he came to the door. He looked more than doubtful—he looked suspicious.

"What is your name?"

"McKane," I said. "Sandy McKane."

The suspicion melted a little, I thought. "Juan speak of you."

"He's been trying to sell me an inter-

est," I lied, "but I like to see what I'm buying. Can't blame me for that, can you?"

He smiled doubtfully, not at all sure. "What did you want to see?"

"The crop."

The woman said something in the dialect to him and her voice was shrill. His answering voice was harsh and then he came out and closed the door.

"Women," he said, and beckoned for me to follow.

There was a field back of the houses and some weeds, high and thick, surrounding the field. What was growing in the field was some kind of five-leaved plant which I didn't recognize, but I took a guess.

"Hemp?" I asked.

He nodded. "There are some other fields over a ways."

"It looks good to me," I said.

He nodded. "Good money crop."

Good marihuana crop, I thought, and, if it's Indian hemp, good hashish. "A cheap product," the Chinese had said, "in the same line." Cheap enough for high school kids and the poor who couldn't afford the more expensive lines of forgetfulness and degeneration.

He walked back to the car with me.

"Juan sent you, all right?" he asked.

I just looked at him. I started the motor and drove away. I rolled, going back to town. They couldn't kill Juan because he controlled the source of supply. Maybe they had a little of their own but not in the quantities Juan had it. And with reefers selling for about a quarter apiece quantity was necessary in this business.

I drove over to the Kealia Hotel when I got back to town. The desk clerk was sure Mr. Mira was still in bed and wouldn't want to be disturbed.

"Give him a buzz anyway," I told him, "and tell him Sandy McKane has to see him, right away."

Which, after some hemming and a little hawing, he agreed to do.

Juan would see me. I went up in the elevator and down the hall and he had the door open when I got there. He was dressed in lavender silk pajamas and a purple silk robe and patent leather slippers.

After I was in and he'd closed the

door I said, "I've just been out to the farm."

"Farm?" Nothing showed in the face.

"Your farm or one of them."

Something showed in the face now—anger. "You in Juan's business?"

"Not for a million dollars. But if you'd told me what it was when you first came to see me I might have had more luck. Or I might have turned you down, depending on my morals that day."

"I no like this," he said.

"Nor me. There's a little fat roly-poly man who seems to be in the same business. A competitor, you might call him. Know him?"

He was looking thoughtful.

"Used to work for Vic Malis," I prompted him.

"Garcia, Joe Garcia. Round man?"

"Round man."

He nodded emphatically. "Joe Garcia. He kill my Dolly?"

"Maybe. He was trying to sell T. Y. Young some reefers but T. Y. works through Vic alone."

"T. Y. Young? I no know him."

"You've got your own agents, your own organization?"

"I have my friends." He put a hand on my arm. "You know who kill Dolly?"

"Just about," I said. "I've got a very good hunch but I wouldn't want to name any names yet. I'm not that sure."

He nodded, looking through me. He had nothing more to say.

FROM there I drove back to town and down to the fish market district again. They were doing a big business this morning but the odor was no stronger, I felt certain. There are limits.

I drove over to the rooming house which was formerly the Queen Hotel and the semi-Hawaiian lady wasn't up but there was a girl in a sleazy black kimona who was. She told me Joe Garcia lived in the front room on the right side of the second floor and I could go up myself and see if he was home.

I went carefully up the stairs and down the hall to the front. I put my .38 in the pocket of my coat and kept my hand on it while I knocked on the door with my left hand. No answer.

I knocked again without result. Then I tried the knob and the door was open.

I kicked it open the rest of the way and stepped in quickly.

It was empty. But there was a closet door, closed. That too was empty. I opened some drawers, and found nothing. The bed had been slept in and there were enough clothes in the closet to make me certain he hadn't changed addresses.

There was a tablet of cheap note paper on top of the dresser. I wrote a note in pencil:

Joe:

It is very important that I see you in my office this afternoon, very important to you.

Sandy McKane

From there I drove over to the Hula Hut. I kept my .38 in the pocket of my jacket. The front door was closed, locked. But that was just for business. I rattled it and in a couple of minutes Vic Malis was coming along the narrow barroom. He didn't look glad to see me. I stepped in and he closed the door again.

"Come back to the office," he said.

I shook my head. "Just a couple of questions."

"I can't guarantee the answers," he said.

"Joe Garcia still working for you?" I asked him.

"No. He's too ambitious. I tied a can to him a couple of months ago. That's a straight answer."

"He's trying to sell your customers."

No answer to that.

"T. Y. Young, for one."

No answer.

"You really didn't have Meat shadowing me, did you? You were just covering for him the other day."

No answer.

"I figured you a little smarter," I told him. "After you get yourself a nice clean profitable business it wouldn't be smart to get it all smashed up because one of your boys goes in for a little personal murder on the side."

"But if you want to take the rap for him, okay. Maybe the police will begin to wonder why Ramsay took so many sleeping tablets. Maybe they'll tie it up with the hibiscus Joe Garcia put in his daughter's car. Maybe they'll get the

whole story."

"From you?"

"All I want to know is—did you have Meat shadow me the other day? And Garcia."

He hesitated. Between loyalty, maybe, and his nice business. Though I really shouldn't accuse him of loyalty, not this boy.

"I didn't."

"Meat's getting ambitious?"

"With what you tell me, maybe."

"Raleigh, how about him? Did you send him to spy on this Valdez girl? Did he make a play for her to get the dope on Juan?"

"I don't think so. He just liked women. I didn't send him anyway. There's no money in Juan's business, not the kind of money I want and not the kind of customers."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be seeing you. I'll be in for a steak."

I went out and he locked the door behind me again. I went over to the office and read the morning paper. There was nothing in it about the hibiscus Linda had received, so the papers didn't know. If they had, that and her father's death would have been too good a story for them to kill. I mixed a drink, my first of the day.

I thought about Linda and tried to stop thinking about her. I felt hungry and irritable and nervous.

At noon I went out to lunch. I ate quickly and came right back to the office. Nothing happened. Nothing happened in the office, that is. Around the island it might have been raining and in other spots not raining. People were probably making love and making biscuits and making marihuana from hemp.

Kids were studying in school and other kids were hanging around corners and in pool halls, studying life. Out at Waikiki people would be swimming and relaxing on the sand and in the cane fields and the pineapple fields day laborers would be putting in their day of labor. But nothing happened in my office excepting that I began to fidget.

I MIXED another drink and thought about Linda and tried to stop thinking about Linda.

About three the phone rang, and a carefully guarded voice came over the wire. "I just got your note. You want to see me?"

"That's right, Joe."

"What about?"

"About saving your life."

"You crazy or something?"

"You want to come over and find out?"

Hesitation, then, "Okay. In about ten minutes."

In about eight he was there and I didn't think he had such a kind face. It was round and not wrinkled but his eyes were hard.

He closed the door behind him, and kept his hand in his pocket. He had a wrinkled linen suit on and no hat and dirty white-and-black shoes.

"What's your story?" he said.

"The Police," I lied, "are trying to nail you for the death of Dolly Valdez and Jefferson Raleigh."

"Those weren't mine."

"I know they weren't. They were Meat Kozak's. But you were the man who drove me out there to Dolly's. Your prints are on the bed out there and they want somebody in a hurry. You'll do. You'll be a lamb they can throw to the lions."

He shook his head. "Never."

"Vic knows you're working against him and that Meat is. Vic's gunning for both of you."

"You don't make sense," he said. "You're talking to the wrong man."

"Maybe I am," I said. "I've got two boys who saw Meat go into Raleigh's apartment and leave it at the time Raleigh was killed. That should do it but if you want to take the rap it won't matter to me. My client will be satisfied and I've already got my money."

He said nothing.

"Raleigh left some information behind, too," I told him. "This is a hard island to get off of, if the police want you, Joe, and too small for hiding in very long."

The door behind him opened and closed. There was a big man standing in the office now, a man named Meat Ko-

zak. He too had his hand in his pocket.

Garcia turned and I looked up and Meat said, "You were lying about those boys of yours, huh?"

I shook my head.

"Why should I kill Raleigh?"

"Because he saw you kill Dolly Valdez. He was hiding in the house when you strangled her and he tried to blackmail you later. So you killed him too. You wanted Juan's business or a part of it."

"It wasn't big enough for Vic but it would do for you and you used that hibiscus gag as a warning. You sent them to Juan so he'd get the tie-up and you killed Juan's girl friend. You couldn't touch him personally without getting into more trouble than you could handle. And without losing your intended source of supply."

"Sounds good," he said. "Only you're guessing."

I shook my head. "I've still got my two boys."

Garcia looked frightened now—but not Meat. Meat just looked thoughtful and ugly. He took his hand out of his pocket. The gun was in it. Maybe he meant to kill me. I never found out. Because, for the third time, the door opened.

Meat whirled swiftly and saw who was there. He tried a shot, a fast shot, and it looked as if it missed for it went crashing into the door and through it.

Garcia and I hit the floor as flame and racket erupted near the doorway.

Meat turned around once, slowly, like a slow-motion picture. Then he crashed. I saw for a moment the short, dapper figure of Juan Mira. Then he toppled too. Meat's shot hadn't missed. It had gone through Mira and then through the door. It was the final count, the last round, for Mira, the often defeated....

Meat lived long enough to confess. Garcia lived long enough to be killed about a week later by a person or persons unknown. Linda no longer lives in the big house by the sea. She lives in the little house by the canal, and her last name is McKane and we're doing very well, thank you.

Murder on Midnight

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

A beautiful tropical Key was a modern Eden until the lure of wealth loosed an evil serpent whose weapon was slaughter!

CHAPTER I

A MAN OF PARTS



ON M I D -
N I G H T
Key Hen-
ry Hollister was
usually called
Captain or
Judge Hollister.
Both titles were
strictly honor-
ary. The nearest
approach to the

he did have a rowboat with an outboard motor and spent a good bit of time fishing—from this came the “Captain.” The title of “Judge” if founded on anything more than his natural dignity and the Southerner’s love of titles, must have stemmed from the fact that he was a notary public.

He was also the local real estate agent, on the town council, on the school board, and was a deputy sheriff, this also an honorary, non-paying job. He was in his middle fifties, heavy, slow moving, good-humored, but bullied by nothing on earth except his wife.

Now Mrs. Hollister was saying, “It seems to me that money causes unhappiness rather than happiness. Too much money, I mean. The richest people who come down here always seem to be the unhappiest. There is Mr. Charles Ross for instance. They say he made his money driving hundreds of persons into bankruptcy, suicide even. He lives alone, except for servants and his young business partner, in a house big enough for

ten persons. But he isn’t happy. He couldn’t get along with that beautiful wife he had—though Lord knows that may have been a good part her fault. And now you take the Pattersons—”

“You take them,” Judge Hollister said.

Mrs. Hollister did not admit the interruption. “They must be worth a million dollars, they have the most elaborate estate on the island, and they are never happy. Mrs. Patterson bossing the family around like slaves, just because the money is hers. Poor Mr. Patterson shutting himself up in his study with his butterflies and his books and hardly daring to come out. And that little Mary Patterson can’t call her soul her own, the way her mother runs her life.”

The judge had been rigging a surf rod. Now he looked up smiling. “How many times have you ever actually seen Mrs. Patterson, or Mr. Patterson either?”

“What difference does that make?” Mamie Hollister demanded. She was a frail, pretty woman. Her health was bad and she rarely went outside her home. She lived in a world of gossip the way children sometimes live in a world of books or imaginary playmates. “If folks don’t want other folks to know what goes on in their homes they shouldn’t have colored help—not on a place as small as Midnight Key.”

FROM the kitchen Mildred, the Negro cook, called, “Yas’m, ain’t it the truth! And Miz Hollister, did I tell you ‘bout de big fight they just had down to the Pattersons? Mr. Charles Ross and

A SUSPENSEFUL COMPLETE NOVELET



Using his flashlight as he went down the steps, Judge Hollister saw the body of Charlie Ross

THRILLING DETECTIVE

dat Miz Allan who used to be his wife and who's visitin' de Pattersons now. Jud told me he couldn't hear it all, but seem like Miz Allan was trying to get some money out of her last husband. Say he done cheated her and she'd get what she was due if she had to kill him for it. And he say if she was going to kill him she better do it soon, or she wouldn't get a dime."

Mrs. Hollister nodded her head at her husband.

"You see? There's going to be trouble, Henry. It's an unnatural situation. This beautiful Mrs. Allan and her new husband visiting the Pattersons right at the time when Mr. Ross, her previous husband, is courting little Mary." Mrs. Hollister made a clicking sound with her lips. "You know, that's strange too. Mr. Ross is a full fifteen years older than the child, maybe twenty. It would be much more normal to see that nice-looking boy . . . what's his name? Who Mr. Ross has as a partner."

"Mike Lloyd, I believe."

"Much more normal to see him instead of Mr. Ross falling in love with Mary."

"Maybe he can't afford to," Judge Hollister said. "I understand he's sort of junior partner in Ross' business, just getting a start after coming out of the Army."

"Anyway I can't understand Mrs. Patterson inviting this Mr. and Mrs. Allan to her home right when her own daughter is getting engaged to Mrs. Allan's first husband. Why do you expect she did it?"

"Probably to observe their effect on one another. From what I hear she is something of a scientist, that woman. She puts flies in bottles to see how long it will take them to die."

Mildred, the cook, called, "Yossur. Jud say she put lizards in the room where Mr. Patterson keep all his butterflies and the lizards ate 'bout half of 'em."

"Glass cages and all," the Judge said. He patted his wife on the shoulder. "That's the lovely part of gossip. It is so much more fascinating than the truth."

There was a knock at the door. They heard Mildred's soft, ponderous, bare-footed tread pass through the house, heard her say, "Yessur, he's here. I'll

call him." Then she did, at the top of her lungs. "Cap'n Henry! Gentleman here to see you."

"Speak of the devil," Henry Hollister thought, going into his living room, for the man standing just inside his door was Mr. Sam Patterson.

He was a small, quiet-looking man who wore thick glasses and carried a walking stick of heavy, black knobbed wood.

"I believe you are the law officer in the village, aren't you, Judge Hollister?" he said.

"I'm a deputy of sorts. Got appointed because nobody else would take it, and because there's a telephone in my house so I can call the sheriff if anything happens. On Midnight Key, fortunately, nothing ever does."

"I'm afraid something has happened."

"Yes?"

"Charles Ross. You know Mr. Ross, I believe?"

"I know him."

"He's dead," Sam Patterson said. . . .

They went in Sam Patterson's car, a huge, black sedan that looked like a hearse. It was late twilight now, the sky blood-poisoned with sunset. Low over the glassy, painted water of the bay long lines of pelicans and ducks were heading for Bird Island and a night's sleep.

"A freakish sort of thing," Sam Patterson said. "A most unfortunate accident."

"Accident?"

Sam Patterson turned with a quick, birdlike movement, peering through his thick glasses. . . .

"Accident," he repeated. "What were you thinking?"

"It's that blasted gossip of Mamie and Mildred," Judge Hollister thought. "Got me jumping at conclusions."

A loud he said, "What kind of accident?"

"He fell down the steps and struck his head on one of the concrete piles at the bottom. It—it cracked his skull."

The little man shivered and his hands were very tight around the steering wheel.

CCHARLES ROSS had built his place on the bay side of the island where a narrow bayou cut inland to a tiny lake.



It was a lonely spot, the bayou and the lake both flanked by solid walls of mangrove. Ross had had the waterway dredged so that he could bring his boat into the lake and tie it up at the foot of his house steps. Because storms sometimes flooded the area the house was built on piling some ten feet above the ground and the boat landing.

Patterson parked his car on the shell drive behind the house.

"Around this way," he said. But at the corner he stopped. "I—I hate to look at—it again. Do you mind if I wait here?"

"All right."

It was almost dark now. The high front steps of the house, the boat landing with cabin cruiser tied alongside, all showed a dim white in the gloom. Judge Hollister took a flashlight from his pocket but did not turn it on. He stepped on the landing, his heels making a hollow, drumlike sound.

Charles Ross lay near the foot of the steps. He lay on his back, his legs outstretched, his arms straight at his sides. His eyes were open but unseeing. Across

his forehead, just inside the hairline, there was a deep, blood-filled dent.

All his money and all the tricks he had resorted to in making it would never help this man again, the Judge thought, flicking on his flashlight. He took one quick look at the dead man's face and turned the light away. He had seen few dead men in his life and would be satisfied never to see another.

The beam of the light moved up the steps. "Standing about there, I expect," the Judge thought.

The light came down the steps, past the body, on the concrete piling about two feet away. The top of the piling was about six inches higher than the deck of the landing and on the top of the piling there was a thin smear of blood.

"That must be where his head struck."

He moved the light up and down the steps again. A man stumbling on the top step could easily have fallen headfirst and struck his head on this piling. And such a fall could easily have killed him.

Judge Hollister went up to stand on

the top step and see how it looked from there. The steps were steep. It gave him a queasy feeling to be standing there. He turned the flashlight on the steps to light his careful way down.

That was when he saw the spot on the floor, about six inches from the first step.

He stood there and looked down at the spot. He was conscious suddenly of the quiet, the deep thick quiet of early night. The soft lapping of water against piling and beach seemed to intensify the silence. Then there was the splash of a fish jumping, and Judge Hollister jumped also.

"Nothing but a dark spot on the floor," he told himself. "Nothing to it."

He went down one step, another. Then almost against his will he turned and went back to the spot on the porch floor and squatted above it.

He couldn't be sure. He touched it with his finger and he still couldn't be positive. Yet it did look like the same stuff that was on the piling below. But if Charlie Ross had fallen here, hit his head here the first time, how could he have also hit the piling which was several feet from the foot of the steps?

CHAPTER II

GOSSIP HAS ITS USES



JUDGE Hollister went down the steps, lighting his way carefully, and looked again at the body of Charles Ross. Using the flashlight he could see that a little blood had spread out on the landing beneath the man's head.

He lifted the head gently and touched the back of it with his other hand. There was another wound here, almost invisible in the thick, longish hair. But it was a sharp crease in the skull as though it too had struck the edge of the piling, not the flat smooth surface of the porch.

"It's that blasted gossip of Mamie and Mildred," Judge Hollister thought again. "I keep getting crazy ideas."

He stood up and started back to join Sam Patterson. He wasn't quite sure why he didn't use his flash and why he

walked more quietly than usual. He went around the corner of the house and stopped, looking about.

Sam Patterson was not there.

Instinctively Hollister buttoned his jacket.

"It's getting cold," he thought. "The wind must have shifted to the north. Or I'm getting goose pimples for no reason at all."

Sam Patterson's car was still there. He could see it, black and hearselike against the shell drive. Then he saw movement in the shadow of the car and said, "There you are, Mr. Patterson," and turned on his light.

The man beside the car turned quickly, startled. He was about average size, young, with a lean face and dark brows. For an instant Judge Hollister did not recognize him. Then he realized it was Mike Lloyd, the young man who had come down with Ross this winter and who was said to be Ross' business partner.

"Where's Mr. Patterson?" Judge Hollister asked.

Patterson's voice answered, "Here. Inside the car. I was just telling Mr. Lloyd about Charlie Ross' accident."

"You didn't know?" Hollister asked the young man.

"No sir. I—I'd been walking. I just got back." He turned his face away from the beam of the flashlight. "How did it happen?"

"He fell down the front steps and hit his head on the piling at the bottom," Patterson said. "An awful thing to see."

It was Mike Lloyd who said, "You saw it happen?"

"Of course I saw it. I was just leaving and he came out on the front steps with me. I was out in the front yard when he called after me and as I looked back he stumbled and fell. Went head-first right down the full length of the steps."

"Did he die right away?" Judge Hollister asked.

"I moved him back from the edge of the landing and tried to make a bandage out of my handkerchief. I—I'm not a doctor, of course, but I think he was already dead. When I was sure nothing else could be done I came for you."

"There's someone else coming," Henry Hollister said, viewing the lights of an approaching automobile. "That'll be the sheriff and the coroner—I hope."

It was...

Sheriff Ed Jones was a law enforcement officer of the modern variety. He had been born in Tonekka County and he knew it from border to border, but he also had been outside the county on occasions. He had gone to the State University and he had also gone to the F.B.I. police school in Washington. He was younger than most sheriffs, in his early thirties, and he took himself and his work with extreme seriousness.

On the morning following Charles Ross' death the sheriff stood on Judge Hollister's front porch.

"I've been up most of the night helping the coroner," he said. "I'm afraid your suspicions are correct."

"My suspicions?" Judge Hollister said. "Young man, I had no suspicions."

The sheriff smiled. "I'd got the impression that you did. Anyway—" He stopped, seeing Mrs. Hollister in the doorway. "Good morning, ma'am."

"Won't you come in and have some coffee, Sheriff?"

"I've had breakfast, thank you, ma'am." And to Mr. Hollister, "If you'll step out to my car a moment, Captain . . ."

"You might as well talk in front of Mamie," Judge Hollister said. "Whatever you tell me she'll worm out of me anyway."

But he let himself be led to the car.

WITH one foot on the running board the sheriff lit his big-bowled pipe. This gave him something of a Sherlock Holmeslike appearance of which he was conscious though he never admitted this even to himself.

"If Mr. Ross had fallen on that concrete piling," he said, "there would have been microscopic bits of it in his scalp. There weren't."

The judge raised his shaggy white brows. "Mr. Patterson claims to have seen him fall."

"Quite possible." The sheriff blew a slow stream of smoke. "You know any motive he might have for killing Charles Ross?"

"Nope."

"We'll have to find something. And with these rich people there are always difficulties."

"I wanted to go fishing," Judge Hollister said wearily....

It was about three miles to the Patterson house.

"Before we get there," the sheriff said, "tell me what you know about these people."

"What I know is nothing. But I've heard a lot of kitchen sink scuttlebutt."

He repeated what he'd heard from Mamie and Mildred the day before.

"When was this quarrel between Ross and Mrs. Allan?" the sheriff asked.

"Recently. I don't know just when."

The Patterson house was a huge, pink stucco affair. On the front steps they were joined by a man who at first glance appeared almost boyish, but who a second look showed to be in his forties, or thereabouts. He was pink-cheeked and blond and although there were faint marks of dissipation beneath his blue eyes, these were fairly well concealed by a light film of powder.

He wore slacks and a lightweight leather jacket and a scarf. The whole outfit might have been taken from one of the more florid illustrations in a woman's magazine.

Judge Hollister introduced himself and the sheriff.

"I'm Stanley Allan, guest of the Pat-tersons, you know," the pink-cheeked man said. "Come in. But I doubt if you'll find anyone else up at this hour." He consulted his wrist-watch. "Scarcely ten o'clock. Wouldn't be up myself if I hadn't promised to play tennis with Mary."

"Good game?" the Judge asked.

"She didn't show up." They went into a large, low-ceiled room where an open fire was burning. "I didn't really expect her after what happened yesterday."

"Was Miss Patterson very upset at her fiance's death?" the sheriff said.

"I expect so. I haven't actually seen her since she got the news. She didn't come down to dinner last night."

"Your wife was married to Mr. Ross at one time, wasn't she?" the sheriff said.

"Yes."

"How did she take the news of his death?"

Stanley Allan frowned, then shrugged. "I don't think there was much affection still existing between them." He turned to Hollister. "Have a drink? It is a bit early, but after what I've seen this morning. . . ." There was a small bar at one side of the room and at this he mixed whisky and soda. "When Mary Patterson didn't show up for tennis I walked over to view the scene of the accident. I have a rather morbid mind, I'm afraid."

"I understand that your wife and Mr. Ross had a quarrel recently over some financial affair," the sheriff said.

Over the rim of his glass Allan looked indignant. "If my wife quarreled with Charlie Ross I'm sure it is her personal business."

"In cases like this we can't always respect personal matters."

Allan's pink cheeks got even pinker. He squared his shoulders angrily, and the gesture reminded Judge Hollister of a child growing defiant.

"Because Charlie Ross falls down a flight of steps and kills himself," he said, "is no reason for a county sheriff to make himself obnoxious."

The sheriff got out his pipe and lit it before answering.

"I'm not too sure Mr. Ross killed himself," he said then.

"I didn't mean suicide. I was talking about the accident."

"Perhaps it wasn't an accident."

"Sam Patterson saw him fall down the steps and strike his head on the concrete piling. The blood is still on the piling. I myself saw it not forty minutes ago. Just what is it you are driving at, Mr. Holmes?"

THE sheriff colored slightly at that, and Judge Hollister said:

"Mr. Patterson's eyesight is very poor."

"Not so poor that if he sees a man standing on a flight of steps not thirty feet away and in clear daylight, and with nobody near him, and sees that man fall down the steps and hit his head on a piling, that anything else could not have happened. What does the sheriff

think—that somebody picked up the piling and hit him with it?"

From behind his cloud of smoke Sheriff Jones said:

"His head never struck the piling. He was struck once on the back of the head, once on the forehead by something like a tire iron or a fire poker. The poker from Mr. Ross' fireplace is missing."

Allan made fish motions with his mouth. "You mean—he—he was—murdered?" His knees sagged and he went down slowly onto a chair. "But—but Mr. Patterson saw . . . He claimed he saw—"

Judge Hollister had been standing near the window. He said, "Mmmm" half-aloud and went quickly out the side door.

There was a lawn with orange and grapefruit trees, a rose garden, and then a high hedge of hibiscus. A walk led through a gap in the hedge and the Judge followed this. As he stepped through the hedge he stopped.

About twenty feet from him a boy and girl stood locked in one another's arms. It was Mary Patterson and Mike Lloyd, the young man he had seen at Ross' place last night.

"Well, well," the Judge said under his breath. "The modern generation moves faster than in my day. They used to wait for 'em to be buried."

The Judge had not been seen and he stepped quietly back through the hedge, back down the path for some thirty feet. Then he started forward again, humming a few bars of "*Love's Old Sweet Song*."

Lloyd and Mary Patterson were standing apart now.

"Good morning," Judge Hollister said jovially. "Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

"Good morning, Captain Hollister," Mary Patterson said.

Mike Lloyd didn't say anything.

"Thought you were playing tennis with Mr. Allan?"

"I didn't see him when I came downstairs," Mary said. "I expect he forgot."

She was a small girl, quietly pretty, yet in a strange, indefinable way there was something almost pathetic about her. Judge Hollister couldn't reconcile this, a sort of shy wistfulness, with what he had seen a few moments before.

"Allan went over to view the scene of Mr. Ross' death," he said. And then in the same tone of voice, "By the way, Lloyd, you were living with Mr. Ross. Do you know what happened to the poker from his fireplace?"

The young man's cheek-bones showed like creases across his face.

"The sheriff asked me that last night. It was missing. I don't know where it went." He hesitated, said slowly, "What can that have to do with the accident?"

"What we are trying to find out." And still in the same conversational tone the Judge added, "As a partner you should come in for a good part of Mr. Ross' business, shouldn't you?"

The man took a quick step toward Hollister, then stopped.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I was asking," the Judge said.

"When I came out of the Army Mr. Ross gave me a job. I appreciated it and did my best at it. He made me a sort of junior partner, but I don't know how much of his business I'll be able to hold."

"That will be pretty well up to you, won't it?"

"I expect so."

"A mighty good opportunity for a young man," the Judge said. "Well, good morning."

He turned and went back to the house.

CHAPTER III

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE



N IN THE living room Stanley Allan was making a second drink.

"My wife's divorce from Ross was rather nasty," he said to the sheriff. "A fight on both sides. And if you know anything about Charlie Ross, you know that he'd stop at nothing to win. Eve, my wife, had had a bit of money when she married him and he'd used this in his firm. She never got it back." He sipped his drink, said, "She could use it now. My income is nothing and spent long before I get it."

"Just what is your business, Mr. Allan?"

"My business? Being charming to rich women." Allan's lip curled and he added, "I don't know any one word for my business, and I wouldn't like it if I did. I sponge off wealthy persons who have more money than I do and less social position, persons who are willing to put up with me because of my family name and because the society columns know me, and persons whom I put up with because I can't afford not to. Persons like the Pattersons."

From the doorway came loud, harsh laughter. All three men turned quickly to see Eve Allan and Mrs. Sam Patterson. It was Mrs. Patterson who had laughed, a raucous, coarse noise like the sound a parrot or crow might make. And yet there was honest humor in it. The woman had actually found Allan's statement funny.

"I never heard your business more accurately described, Stan," she said, through her laughter. "You'll have to excuse my laughing."

"Quite all right," Allan said. "You often find the truth amusing."

"Particularly from people unaccustomed to telling it. But it wasn't your social prestige that made me invite you to *Midnight Key*."

"Just what was your reason, Mrs. Patterson?" Judge Hollister said.

She looked at him. She was a small woman and still fairly pretty, though it was hard to notice either her size or the remains of what had once been beauty. Years of wielding the power of her fortune as someone else might wield a sword had built in her a sense of power that was like a physical emanation, an aura of power—and evil. She looked at Judge Hollister a long time, her gaze flat and hard on his face. And then she laughed, that short, harsh laugh like the squawk of a bird. It was the only answer she gave.

She turned to the sheriff. "You are Sheriff Jones?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry to bother you so early in the morning."

"I didn't know anyone except the idle rich and house guests would think it particularly early." She introduced Mrs. Allan, said, "I understand you wanted to see my husband too, but he seems to have disappeared. Out chasing

butterflies, I expect."

Allan crossed to stand beside his wife. "The sheriff thinks that Charlie Ross was murdered," he said.

Both women looked at him in apparent surprise. Hollister saw Mrs. Allan wet her lips.

"But Sam saw—he told us—he saw the accident," she said after a moment. "Well, well," Mrs. Patterson said, and then said it again. "Perhaps that is why Sheriff Jones wanted to talk to Sam."

"Yes'm. I wanted to talk to all of you. I wanted to ask if there was a reason that someone, anyone, might want to have Mr. Ross out of the way."

"Anyone who knew Charlie Ross had at least one reason for wanting to kill him," Mrs. Patterson answered, then added, "Though I will say that women found him attractive."

"You say that," Stanley Allan remarked, "as though you were not a woman."

She looked at him squarely. "I, too. Though I am getting a bit old for that sort of thing."

Allan turned to his wife. "The sheriff seems to think that you quarreled with Charlie recently." His voice was gentle.

Eve Allan was a very beautiful woman. Even now, with her face pale beneath its rouge, she was beautiful. It was an appealing, helpless-looking beauty, though her husbands had found the helpless look to be a delusion at times.

"It—it wasn't a quarrel really," she said. "Just a private hangover from the old days. We never got along."

"I've wired his lawyer," the sheriff said, "but it would save us time if anyone here knew the terms of Mr. Ross' will."

"Go ahead, darling," Mrs. Patterson said. "Tell him."

"It's only what he said. I don't know that it's true."

"Tell the sheriff, darling," Mrs. Patterson said again.

EVE ALLAN, beautiful and appealing and helpless, looked at the sheriff. "He said he hadn't changed his will since our divorce."

"And you will inherit?"

"Not—the business," she said. "I

wouldn't know what to do with a business. But I expect I'll get quite a bit of money."

"Yes, quite a bit," Mrs. Patterson said. Her voice was as husky as a man's. "Several hundred thousands of dollars, I expect."

"If you are trying to imply, my dear, that Eve killed Charlie Ross," Stanley Allan said, "it's really unnecessary. She couldn't have. She was with me all yesterday afternoon, on the beach. . . ."

The sheriff drove slowly out of the Patterson private grounds onto the little road that wound across the island toward Charlie Ross' house. He was frowning, deep in thought. Judge Hollister was whistling the Number One song from the hit parade. The sheriff glanced at him, started to say something, and stopped out of respect for the Judge's age. Sheriff Jones was particular about these things.

"You worry about the case," Judge Hollister said. "You are paid for it."

"I need two things before I can even start worrying successfully—the poker he was probably killed with, and a straight story from Mr. Patterson."

"These quiet, henpecked men can be pretty stubborn sometimes," observed the Judge.

"They can be more than that. I read of a case once when I was at the F.B.I. school where one of them broke loose and killed his wife, her boy friend, and two other guys."

"In this case Mrs. Patterson hasn't been killed."

"Not yet," the sheriff said. "I wonder where that man is. I don't like this disappearing act. Perhaps I—"

His body jolted forward as the car lurched, skidded to a stop just in time to avoid hitting young Mike Lloyd who had leaped into the road ahead of it.

Lloyd came to the side of the car.

"Saw you as you started out of the Pattersons' drive," he said. "I ran to head you off." He was breathing heavily as he stood there looking from Judge Hollister to Sheriff Jones. "I want to know if Mr. Ross was murdered."

"We're going to Ross' place now," Judge Hollister said pleasantly. "Like to ride?"

The young man got in the back seat.

He leaned forward as though trying to see the faces of the men in front.

"Was Mr. Ross murdered?"

"We'll know that when we find the missing fire poker," Judge Hollister said. "Without it there isn't much proof of anything." He half turned on the seat. "How long have you been courting Miss Patterson?"

He saw the young man flinch. Then the lean, dark face hardened—and Judge Hollister knew suddenly that he was looking at a man capable of any action he deemed necessary.

"I scarcely know her," Mike Lloyd said. "Mr. Ross wanted to marry her and I've seen her with him."

"Ross was a personal friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"As I told you, he gave me a job when I didn't have one, when I didn't even know what I wanted to do. I was just out of the Army and having trouble getting adjusted."

"He must have liked you, bringing you down here and all."

"I think he did. I think he felt almost like a father, or older brother."

"And you?"

"In a way," Mike Lloyd said slowly, "I liked him."

In front of Charlie Ross' house two boats were at work, dragging the lake and bayou for an iron poker.

"We are short on men to search the brush," the sheriff said. "But sooner or later we'll find the thing."

JUDGE Hollister sat on the front steps.

He looked at the blood on the piling, the dark stain still showing on the porch and on the landing where the body had lain. He watched the slow progress of the boat in the bayou. And from the corners of his eyes he watched Mike Lloyd.

The young man had sat beside the Judge for a while, then gone to pace nervously back and forth on the dock and on the shell drive alongside the house. He went into the house and came back out again a few minutes later. He strolled about the place as he had done before, and then, with one quick glance about him, he disappeared into the mangroves.

Judge Hollister got up and stretched.

He went down the steps and aboard Charlie Ross' cabin cruiser which was still tied to the dock. There was tackle of all sorts in the cabin and Judge Hollister selected a plug rod with a small spoon.

He made a couple of casts from the dock, then began to work his way inland along the edge of the lake in the same direction in which Mike Lloyd had gone. Apparently intent on his fishing, he moved quietly for so big and stomachy a man, and he handled the plug rod as though he had been born with it in his hand.

Within three minutes he caught his first glimpse of Mike Lloyd. The young man was in the thick brush back from the lake, and appeared to be going first in one direction and then the other.

CHAPTER IV

GOOD FISHING



ASTING, interested only in his fishing, the Judge followed Mike Lloyd.

He hadn't expected to catch any fish. Fish didn't come into the lake much since Ross had had it dredged for his boat. So the Judge was startled when a big redfish struck his line. He almost lost it in that first surprised moment. Then he went to work on it—and when there was a good fish on his line Judge Hollister thought about it and nothing else.

When he had got the fish to him and released it, he looked about. Mike Lloyd had disappeared. Another ten minutes fishing failed to locate him.

The Judge turned inland then, through the thick palmetto and buttonwood and mangrove, going in the general direction of the Patterson house. In five minutes he came on another tidal lake. This one opened out through a narrow pass onto the gulf beach. There were houses along the beach, but the lake itself seemed as primitive as forgotten time.

The Judge began to circle the lake.

"There ought to be one," he thought. "There are boys on this island between ten and fifteen years old. So there ought

to be one."

And then he found it, hidden in the deep sawgrass along the edge—a crude raft of palmetto logs lashed together with wild grape vines.

"Built a dozen like it myself," the Judge thought, and sighed, thinking how many years ago that was.

He pushed and heaved the raft until it was afloat. With a dead tree limb he poled himself toward the middle of the lake. It was low tide now, the water not more than five or six feet deep, and clear. He poled slowly, leaning over, looking into the clear water.

He saw the dark shadow on the bottom to his left, and he heaved on his poling limb to move toward it. The raft slipped sideward through the water—and the poling limb snapped off, above Judge Hollister's hands, in the place where his head had been an instant before. There was the sharp, clear crack of a light caliber gun.

The Judge went off the raft backward in what was the fanciest dive he had made in thirty years. While he was in the air he heard the second crack of the gun, the bee-buzz of the bullet. Then he was in the water and the water was cold.

He came up directly under the raft, struck his head on it, and went down again. He came up more slowly next time, getting the raft with his hands, tilting his head back to bring his nose up in a crack between the logs. He could breathe this way; he could even see a little—the blank wall of mangrove and buttonwood about the lake, nothing else.

He stayed there, his teeth chattering, and through the chattering he cursed himself, the sheriff, and the person who had shot at him.

A man appeared at the edge of the lake. It was a man Judge Hollister had never seen before, a short, heavy-set man in dark clothes. He stared out across from the lake, turned, stopped.

"You hear shooting over this way?" he called.

From behind the Judge a voice answered.

"I heard a couple of shots. But I don't see anybody." It was the voice of Mike Lloyd.

The Judge popped out from under the

raft on the side toward the man he didn't know.

"Who are you?" he called.

The man looked soberly toward the Judge, without surprise, as though he were accustomed to seeing men turn up from under rafts at any hour of the day or night.

"Deputy sheriff." He added, "Cold out there, ain't it?"

"Yeah," the Judge said. "You looking for that poker?"

"I ain't found it yet."

"I have," the Judge said. "And since I'm already wet I might as well get it."

He stuck his head under the water. His broad, dripping body rose into view and slid under the surface. When he came into sight again he had an iron poker clasped in his right hand. . . .

MIKE LLOYD walked with Judge Hollister and the deputy back toward the Ross house.

"I was looking for that poker myself," Mike said. "The sheriff said he was short of men to search and I thought I'd help."

"You should have found it," the Judge said. "I'm too old for that sort of thing."

"Still seems to me I heard some shooting out there," the deputy said.

"So did I. That's why I was in the water."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Whoever threw that poker in there saw me locate it and tried to keep me from getting it."

"Well, well," the deputy said. "Hit you?"

"No."

The deputy looked at the size of Judge Hollister.

"Pore shootin'," he said.

Sheriff Jones was standing on the boat landing in front of Charles Ross' house, and with him was Mrs. Sam Patterson. She wore slacks and a dark blue pull-over sweater. Her hair was windblown. Neither she nor the sheriff saw Judge Hollister.

"It could still pass as an accident," Mrs. Patterson was saying. "You don't have any case without the poker, or whatever the thing was. And it would be easy enough not to find that. All you have to do is quit looking."

The sheriff's face was white, dead-white except for his eyes. His nostrils were flared and he was breathing hard.

"You are offering me a bribe, Mrs. Patterson?"

"You can call it that. I'll pay you to forget Charlie Ross."

Even Mrs. Patterson knew then that she had gone too far. She stepped back, raising a hand as though she expected the sheriff to strike her. And Judge Hollister said, stepping onto the boat landing:

"I could have told you, Mrs. Patterson, you'd be wasting your time trying to bribe Ed Jones. And besides, it's too late. I've found the poker."

Mrs. Patterson looked at Hollister, dripping wet and holding the poker aloft in one hand.

"Well, so you did," she said, and laughed that harsh, humorous laughter of hers. "Now see what good it will do you."

She walked off the landing around the house, and out of sight.

"How long's she been here?" the Judge asked, looking after her.

"She got here three or four minutes before you."

"Walking?"

"I didn't hear any car. It's a good walk from her house though. Where are you going?"

"Into Charlie Ross' place. There ought to be a bottle of liquor there. And I need it. . . ."

Mamie Hollister stabbed briskly with her needle at the sock she was darning.

"Henry," she said, "quit beating around the bush. Who was it killed Mr. Ross?"

The Judge was cleaning a twelve-gauge, double-barreled shotgun. He thought better when his hands were busy with guns or fishing tackle.

"That poker was in Alligator Slough," he said, talking as much to himself as to his wife. "The person that put it there may have figured that the bayou in front of Ross' place would certainly be searched. They may not have had time to take it out into the bay, been afraid to carry it out onto the gulf beach and throw it into the gulf because of the houses around, and so took it over to Alligator Slough and threw it there,

knowing about the place all along. Or—"

"Quit mumbling, Henry. Speak so I can understand you."

"Or the person may have been frightened, acting on emotional impulse, running away without knowing he, or she, still held onto the poker. The slough is on a fairly direct line between Ross' place and the Pattersons', and this person may have found it by chance."

"I don't see that it makes any difference *why* it was thrown there. I want you to tell me *who* did it."

"You are better than I am at knowing things you never saw. You tell me."

She rocked for a while, her needle working in time with her rocking.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you who I think it was. I think it was this Mr. Stanley Allan."

JUDGE HOLLISTER looked at his wife in surprise.

"Good heavens!" he said. "A man you never saw in your life and now you hang a murder on him."

"But he had such a good reason."

The Judge squinted through the clean barrel of the shotgun.

"So did young Lloyd."

"But this Mr. Allan was sick of living the way he's been doing, using his social position and the fact that his family once had money to sponge off the rich. He wouldn't have said what he did to you and Sheriff Jones if he wasn't sick of it. And then he learned that his wife would inherit all this money from Mr. Ross, but only if Mr. Ross died without remarrying. And he planned to remarry. He was going to marry that nice little Patterson girl."

The Judge raised his white, bushy eyebrows and his wife said, "She is a nice girl, and I don't care if you did see her kissing this young Lloyd fellow. It was much more natural that she should be in love with him than with a man fifteen years older than herself."

"She was planning to marry the older one," reminded the Judge.

"Mr. Ross was handsome and—"

"Women found him attractive," Judge Hollister said, remembering Mrs. Patterson's statement.

"Definitely."

"Huh! You too?"

"Don't be absurd, Henry. So it would be easy enough for her to become engaged to Mr. Ross before she realized this Lloyd fellow was the right one."

The Judge clicked his gun shut, put it to his shoulder as though sighting on a rising covey.

"So they are hanging Stanley Allan in the morning," he said, "even though his wife testifies he was on the beach with her at the time of the murder. And what about Mr. Patterson? What about his story and where the devil is he now? Where has he disappeared to?"

"I don't know that."

"You mean the kitchen grapevine has failed?"

"Mildred said that Rosalie—that's the Patterson cook—saw Mr. Patterson leave the house early this morning. She said he slipped out as though afraid someone would see him. And no one has seen him since."

"He'll turn up," the Judge said. "But he may be dead."

There was a knock on the door.

"Ed Jones probably," Judge Hollister said.

He stood up, leaned his shotgun against the wall and went to the door.

A quarter moon hung low over the gulf. It put a trail across the water and made the beach the color of shadowed cream, but the narrow strip of grass and seagrape between the beach and Judge Hollister's porch was dark, and the porch itself was dark.

"Who's there?" the Judge said, looking out and seeing no one.

"May I come in?" The man who spoke was close to him, half-crouched in the deeper shadows against the wall.

The Judge had to lean forward to see that it was Sam Patterson.

CHAPTER V

THE WORM THAT TURNED



SAM PATTERSON'S clothes were dirty, his face was dirty. He peered through his thick glasses at Mrs. Hollister, then at the Judge.

"I—I'd like to speak to you," he said. "In private."

The Judge waved a hand

at his wife.

"I don't have any secrets from Mamie. Try to sometimes, but it doesn't work. She gets them out of me."

"She knows about the story I told you and the sheriff—about seeing Charlie Ross fall down those steps?"

"Yes."

The little man wet his lips. "That story wasn't true."

"I know that," Judge Hollister said.

"I'd like to know why you told it."

"Sit down, Mr. Patterson," Mrs. Hollister said. "Henry, sit down. Would you like some coffee, Mr. Patterson, or tea?"

"No, thank you."

"A drink?" the Judge said.

"Thank you. I don't drink often. But now—"

With the drink in his hand Patterson said, "That story—I shouldn't have told it. But I thought—I thought young Lloyd had killed him."

"Why did you think that?"

"He had come to me that afternoon, young Lloyd I mean. He wanted me to stop my daughter from marrying Charlie Ross. He said he didn't want to go to Ross himself because he was grateful to Ross for the things he'd done, helping him get started in business, you know. He didn't want to quarrel with Ross because he might lose his job if he did, and also he said it wasn't any of his business really. And Ross would pay more attention to me."

"Just why did he want you to stop the wedding?"

"Henry," Mrs. Hollister said, "you can be so stupid sometimes."

"Ross wasn't the kind of man to marry Mary," Mr. Patterson said. "He—well, he had been good to young Lloyd, but he was cruel in many ways. Mary couldn't have been happy with him, not possibly. Mike Lloyd knew this and—he smiled suddenly, shyly—"I think he was in love with Mary and didn't know it. I think those two have been in love since they met, but Edith, Mrs. Patterson, wanted Mary to marry Ross. And Mary's always done what her mother wanted. And Lloyd avoided her rather."

"Of course," Mrs. Hollister said. "He was loyal to Mr. Ross for giving him his start. He didn't want to fall in love with

Mr. Ross' sweetheart. But he just couldn't help it."

Mr. Patterson looked at her with surprise.

"She lives other persons' lives all day long," Judge Hollister said. "She knows more about them than they know themselves, even if it's wrong."

Mr. Patterson smiled faintly. "I told young Lloyd I didn't think I could stop the wedding. Mrs. Patterson wanted it and—well, she usually gets her way, as I said. Lloyd got angry with me when I told him. He said he'd stop the wedding himself. And he'd been drinking."

"Go ahead," the Judge said.

"I thought about it after Lloyd left. I love my daughter, and I knew this marriage was a horrible mistake." He wet his lips again. "I decided to go and see Mr. Ross myself."

"And found him dead?"

"I saw a man running away from the place. I just got a glimpse of him and I thought it was young Lloyd. My eyes aren't good, you know. A few moments later I found Charlie Ross. I thought Lloyd had killed him in trying to help my daughter, and I wanted to do something in return. I didn't see the wound on the back of Ross' head. I moved the body and put the blood on the piling."

"And now you don't think it was Lloyd?"

"It couldn't have been." He rubbed his hands together nervously. "Last night after dinner, after I'd told everyone I saw Charlie Ross fall down the steps, Mary mentioned that she had been with young Lloyd all during the afternoon. So it couldn't have been him."

"If she was telling the truth," Judge Hollister said.

Patterson looked surprised. "I didn't think of that. I just thought it must be someone else who had killed him. And that this other person must know I had seen him. I got afraid of what this other person might do, but I was also afraid to go back to the sheriff and say I had lied." He smiled his faint smile at the Judge. "I'm not a very brave person. I hid all day trying to decide what to do. Then I came to you."

"You should have gone to Ed Jones. I'm just an unofficial, nonpaid deputy."

"Henry, quit talking like that," Mrs.

Hollister said. "You go right down and arrest that man."

"Now look, Mamie. I—"

IT SEEMED to Judge Hollister that all three sounds were separate, distinct from one another, coming to him in sequence—first, the snap of the bullet against the window glass, next Sam Patterson's strangled cry, and then the soft clear crack of the gun.

Judge Henry Hollister was moving almost before the third one of those sounds reached him. A person watching would have understood now what made him one of the best hunters in Florida, the movements amazingly swift and coordinated in a man of this size.

One hand hit the light switch as he came out of his chair. Two steps, and he'd reached the open desk drawer where his shells were kept and had a pair of them. Then he was scooping up the shotgun as though he could see it perfectly in the dark, and the next instant was out the front door.

The figure was dark against the dark land between porch and beach, one instant dimly visible, the next vanishing into the black hulk of a buttonwood. Judge Hollister had shot many a quail, knocking it down as it came from behind a small pine or palmetto. Beyond the buttonwood the figure loomed again momentarily, running. Judge Hollister gave it the choke barrel.

He didn't wait. He knew the instant he fired whether he would hit or miss, and he rarely missed. With the gun over his arm he went down the steps.

"Shoot at guests in my house, will he!" he muttered.

Stanley Allan was lying face down in the sea oats, whimpering.

"Bull's-eye," the Judge said, examining him. "Too bad it was only bird shot. Even so, if they put you in the electric chair they'll have to let you sit on a pillow. . . ."

* * * * *

Judge Hollister said, "Now Mamie, you know you were just guessing. You'd never seen this man Allan when you named him the murderer."

"But it was obvious," she said. "He wanted money and this was his chance to get a lot of it—his only chance, since

certainly he would never work for any. And the first time Mildred ever told me about him I knew he was a thoroughly unlikable person."

"Did Mildred ever see him?"

"She doesn't have to see him," Mrs. Hollister said impatiently. "Jud and the other help at the Pattersons told her about him."

THE Judge put one hand to his forehead.

"The incredible things the female tongue can do! It's too bad the State won't let you try him as well. He claims the murder was impulsive, not planned, and he's probably right. He says he went to see Ross in an effort to get back the money which he and Mrs. Allan thought was rightfully hers. They quar-

reled, and he lost his temper and struck Ross from behind with the poker. Ross half turned—reflex probably, the way a buck keeps running sometimes after he's already dead—and Allan hit him again. Then he heard Sam Patterson's car coming and he ran, still holding to the poker without knowing it."

"And how is poor Mr. Patterson?"

"Be all right in a few days. The bullet just poked him. Allan was a poor shot, as I can testify."

"He was afraid Mr. Patterson had recognized him and would tell the truth about what had happened, now that the sheriff knew it was actually murder," said Mrs. Hollister.

"You are as correct," the Judge said, "as if you had it direct from the kitchen grapevine."



Next Issue's Headliners

CARROLL JOHN DALY'S featured novel, *I'LL FEEL BETTER WHEN YOU'RE DEAD*, presents that hard-boiled investigator, Race Williams, at his toughest and in top form! Race takes on the job of saving a kidnaped girl—and it leads him right behind the scenes of the city's underworld. It's a taut, tense and terrific novel packed with surprises!

* * * * *

R EPORTER Dwight Berke and his wife Gail move in on the killer of a racetrack and industrial magnate—with the result that Di gets himself neatly framed in *MURDER THROWS A RINGER*, the exciting complete novelet by Carl G. Hodges coming next issue. It's a yarn that will keep you guessing from start to finish.

* * * * *

IT HAPPENED in the Florida swamplands—the strange case of the murdered body in the boat! The case that will keep you gripping the sides of your chair as you follow the ingenious plot of *THE STRANGLER*, by Curtiss T. Gardner, another smashing novelet coming in our next issue. Look forward to this unusual whodunit!

* * * * *

MURDER stalks silently in *STEP BY STEP*, a mystery yarn by William O'Sullivan which will amaze you with its dramatic insight. The hero is an F.B.I. man in Vermont and the way in which he works out the solution to a heinous crime will hold you breathless.

* * * * *

ENTERTAINING stories by other favorite writers, plus another HEADQUARTERS chat, will round out an issue filled to the brim with thrills, suspense and action. Be on hand for a feast of good reading!



Kneeling down beside Paula's body, I pointed
to the cut in her head

HOLLYWOOD MURDER

By JACK KOFOED

The film colony was stirred by the slaying of pretty Paula Lee—and her death was a grim challenge to Doc Tuttle and Sleuth Burns!

IT ALWAYS made Detective Lieutenant Jimmy Burns sore when I ribbed him about a murder the Homicide Squad had not been able to solve.

"Pretty soft for you movie writers," he'd say. "You set up a story to suit yourselves. You don't find clues, and work things out. You just throw phony

ones around to fool the people who look at your silly pictures."

"Don't kid me," I'd answer. "You couldn't tell a clue from a bowl of chili con carne. The only time you catch anybody is when a stool-pigeon calls you up and gives you the guilty guy's address."

I didn't really mean that. Burns was

a smart cop, who knew his way around, but he was touchy about his business.

"Sometime I'll take you in on a murder," Jimmy said, "and let you show what kind of a cop you would have made in real life. You can start from scratch. Then, maybe you won't be so critical when we miss grabbing a killer."

"It will be a pleasure. When?"

"Murders are like colds," Burns said. "You never know when one will pop up. If you could pick one, what particular type would you like?"

"Anything involving a good looking girl and a prominent man. And, if you have a killing for me, I'll bet you a hundred-dollar suit of clothes I solve it before you do."

"I've got you. I could use a new suit. I'll call you as soon as the kind of murder you'd like crops up. Fair enough?"

"Sure, Jimmy," I said. "But, don't murder somebody yourself just to win the bet."

Burns laughed. "Everything's fair in love and war," he said.

I came to know Paula Lee before I went to work for Mammoth Pictures. She was one of the girls around Hollywood. You see them at the Brown Derby or the Trocadero or Mike Romanoff's, with a different guy each time. I got her bit parts in pictures occasionally, but she didn't care much about making a profession of the movies.

Paula didn't mean a thing to me, but I felt a little sorry for her. The kid wasn't getting any younger. I'd guess she was on the edge of thirty, which isn't old, but there was a hard touch in her eyes, and around her mouth. Sort of sullen, and a little unhappy.

At first Paula traveled with important people, writers, actors, directors. She even went out with Mr. Kapilow, the president of Mammoth Pictures, when a lot of people said she was the prettiest girl in Hollywood. Then, the quality of her escorts seemed to slip. Finally, she was always around with guys, who had slicked down hair, wrap-around camel's hair coats, and the look of men who ran speakeasies in prohibition days.

One evening I dropped into a quiet little bar on Wilshire Boulevard. I often went there, because one of the bar-

tenders was an ex-golf professional who straightened me out when I began hooking my drives. But, I didn't have a chance to talk golf. Paula Lee was sitting at the bar, knocking off what must have been her sixth Scotch. I bought the seventh. "You look lower than Grand Canyon," I said.

SHE NODDED, but didn't answer. She could be tight mouthed whenever she wanted to.

"Where's your boy friend, Ray Keene?" I asked. "When I was a reporter in New York, Ray was selected by the police as the stickup man most likely to wind up in the electric chair. I know he's supposed to have turned honest, but Keene is bad company for a girl like you."

Paula gulped her Scotch as though it was the last one she'd ever taste. The girl held her liquor like a longshoreman.

"Was, not *is*," she said. "Men are bad for me. They're rats, all of 'em except you. You're the only one who has been really nice, Mr. Tuttle."

"Mister? You're not getting on your dignity by any chance, are you?"

"All right—Doc. I know all about Ray, but he's better than some of your five-thousand-dollar-a-week pals."

"Knowing those rotters," I admitted, "I'd say no one could give you an argument on that point. But you're not happy about Keene, either. What has he done—given you the air for a younger gal, or is that remark unkind?"

"It's true. That's what he's done. Buy me another drink."

I did, a double one this time.

"Look, Paula," I said, "being a writer, I like to delve into what story writers call psychology. How does a girl feel when she gets the brushoff?"

"Rotten, but I've been expecting it for weeks. Ray stuck with me longer than he ever did with anybody else. All right. So, I've had it. Why cry?"

"Any plans?" I asked.

"Well, Ray gave me a stake, but it won't last forever. I'm taking a job in a night club on The Strip. But, as long as there are men around I'll make out. This time I'm going to hit something good. The rum dums I've been playing around with lately must have hid their

money in cement mixers. After all, I do know things about fellows who have plenty stashed away."

"Not blackmail?"

"That's a mean word," Paula said. "Even the police don't like it."

"Well, I may run in to see you," I said. "I've finished my third picture this year, and I'm as rickety as a nineteen-twenty Ford. I haven't a single ulcer yet, but Mr. Kapilow is sure I'll come up with a flock of them. Just today he said, 'Doc, my friend, you need a rest. Don't even think about a script, unless you come onto a colossal idea. You're the best writer I've got, and I don't want anything to happen to you. So, I'm going to take it easy for awhile. What's the name of that upholstered sewer you're going to work in?'"

"The Venus Club. It's run by a little squirt named Luis Benedetti."

"I remember Benedetti from New York," I said. "He'd like to make good at larceny, but fumbles too much. Do you want any dough, honey? I'll be glad to let you have a hundred, if you want it. I've been riding pretty nice this year, and I never did have a rubber band around my bankroll."

"I always need folding stuff," Paula said, tucking the money into her bag. "Thanks, Doc. You're the nicest guy in Hollywood. Give me a call sometime. I'll get along without Ray Keene."

"Sure," I said. "Sure, you will. But, if you're nursing ideas of putting a fast squeeze on anybody, darling, forget it. You don't think fast enough for the blackmail league, and jail is a tough place to keep that figure of yours as nice as it is now."

PAULA finished her drink, kissed me on the cheek, and went out. She had a rhythmic weave to her hips that was fascinating. She was all right in her way, but it wasn't my way. Giving her money didn't mean anything. You give money to guys from your home town, even though you didn't know them back there. You hand out for poorer reasons than I had for slipping a bill to this kid. I felt sorry for Paula because she seemed to get into more trouble than anybody I knew, and she wouldn't have a bed of roses working for that greasy-haired

Luis Benedetti, either, if my guess was right.

When I cleaned up the last detail before starting my holiday, I dropped in to see Mr. Kapilow. He was a little guy, whose hair was getting thin on top, and whose round little tummy made him look as though he had swallowed a cantaloup. Mr. Kapilow had married one of the Mack Sennett girls. Being an ex-Mack Sennett girl dates a woman as much as if she admitted having watched the Admiral Dewey parade after the Spanish-American war. Personally, I preferred Bernice O'Halloran Kapilow to a lot of the dizzy and beautiful young things you see around Hollywood, but everyone to his own taste.

"What are you going to do with your vacation?" Mr. Kapilow asked.

"Oh, just fool around—golf, fish, you know. Forget pictures. That's the main thing. Relax."

"Women?" asked Mr. Kapilow, with a meaning wink.

I knew he had played around with Paula Lee. When he had been chummy with a girl, he always seemed to take a possessive interest in her after they had split up. It almost seemed as if he was jealous of anyone taking his ex-sweethearts around. So, I thought I'd rib the little man by talking about Paula. I told him she had broken off with Ray Keene, and was going to work in the Venus Club for Luis Benedetti.

Mr. Kapilow winced. "I don't like that," he said. "Paula's changed. She's getting hard. It was all right when Keene was putting up for her, but now that she's on her own, she's likely to get a few ideas about prying a fast buck out of me."

"Why you, in particular?"

"Because I didn't give her what she wanted, and her memory isn't much worse than an elephant's."

"You can afford blackmail," I said, unsympathetically.

"It ain't the principal as much as the money," said Mr. Kapilow. "I get eight thousand dollars a week, but after taxes and my wife, to say nothing of a lot of other things, I can't pay off to a blackmailer. Why, the upkeep of that yacht of mine costs me forty grand a year."

I yawned, but I was interested. This

line of conversation fitted in perfectly with the hint Paula had dropped. Certainly, if she put the bee on anybody, Mr. Kapilow was the logical character to be tapped.

"Could she really tell things about you?" I asked.

"Could she!" Mr. Kapilow shuddered. "If my wife listened to her conversation, I'd probably get a bullet right in the kisser. Bernice has a quick temper, and is not very forgiving."

"Look," I said, "I've known Paula Lee for six years. She's a chiseler at heart. Any dame like her has got to be, or she couldn't get by in Hollywood. But, she's no blackmailler. You can take my word for that."

Mr. Kapilow ran nervous fingers through his thinning hair.

"I wish I could believe it," he said, "but the very thought of her makes me jumpy. She's bound to get ideas."

"Forget it," I said. "She's as safe as the late John Dillinger at a Sunday School strawberry festival."

"Paula better not start anything," Mr. Kapilow said. "I may not look it, but I can be a very hard character when the occasion demands."

It must have been a week later when I dropped into the Venus Club. Paula's name was in lights on the marquee, but I didn't see her around. I asked Luis Benedetti where she was. He shrugged his round shoulders.

"We'll announce that Miss Lee is sick tonight, and Dolly Hall will take her place, but Paula ain't sick. She's the healthiest dame I know. Mr. Kapilow took her out to his yacht."

I thought: Kapilow is sure the world's champion sucker. There he was, griping about how Paula might blackmail him, and then he sticks his neck 'way out to here. I think I'll run out to the yacht, and see what's going on. It might be interesting.

BENEDETTI looked at me with his shrewd little eyes. "You ain't aimin' to start trouble, are you?" he asked. "If you are a jealous guy, I could lose a singer, and you could lose a job."

I laughed. "Not a chance. But, I like both those crazy people, and maybe, if I stick my nose in where it doesn't belong,

I can save them both a lot of trouble."

"All it looks like to me is a headache," said Benedetti, "but you got enough money to buy all the aspirin you need."

It was a lovely night with a big moon. I drove to the yacht, and parked. I could see the outline of the *Cynara* against the sky, but it was dark, and the yacht's tender was fastened to the dock. The watchman, whose name was Wumpelmeyer, strolled up, and I asked him if Mr. Kapilow was aboard.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Mr. Kapilow came on board with that Lee dame about an hour ago. I guess somethin' was wrong, because both of 'em were madder 'n a couple of tomcats tied up in a bag."

"What about?"

"How would I know?" the watchman grunted. "They don't tell me nothin'. But, Mr. Kapilow said he'd knock her brains out if she caused trouble."

"Anybody else on board the *Cynara*?"

"Nobody but the engineer, and he's in bed with a bottle of White Horse. Yes-sir, he's the drunkest man I've seen in twenty years."

I wanted to go aboard, and have a look at what was going on, but I knew Wumpelmeyer wouldn't let me. He had a walloping right hand punch, too. I thought: Forget the whole deal. Suppose they do have a fight. Mr. Kapilow would get all the worst of it in a rough and tumble with Paula. She's battled with experts.

So, I climbed into my car, and drove back to the Venus Club. Luis seemed surprised to see me. There was something strange in that surprise of his, something wrong. I didn't know what was wrong, but there was something.

"Have a drink, Mr. Tuttle," Benedetti said. "This one is on the house."

"Sure," I said. . . .

I was still in bed the next morning when the telephone bell jangled. I looked at the clock on the night table. It was eleven o'clock.

"This is Jimmy Burns," a voice said.

"If it's a pinch, I won't resist, but why not wait till daylight?"

"I thought you'd want to know. Paula Lee is dead!"

"Who killed her?"

Burns laughed. "You've written too many detective stories, Doc. This isn't the murder we have a bet on. From the

reports I got, it couldn't be anything but an accident. They found her body on the beach. If you want to come along, I'll pick you up."

"I'll be ready," I told him.

While I was dressing, I considered possibilities. It was too much of a coincidence to believe Paula had died, either naturally, or by accident. This had to be murder, even though Burns knew nothing about it.

If it did turn out that Miss Lee had been murdered, the finger was bound to point in the direction of Mr. Kapilow. Luis Benedetti would swear he had picked Paula up at the Venus Club. Wumpelmeyer would admit the girl had gone aboard the *Cynara* with the movie producer. It might even be shown that Mr. Kapilow was the last person to see Paula Lee alive, and the combination of all this assorted testimony might well be fatal.

By the time I reached this conclusion, I had dressed, and was knotting my tie, when Jimmy Burns rang the bell. He came in, big and ruddy and bustling with the enthusiasm that was always a part of him.

"Well, kid," I said, "so you've tossed me into a murder just to get a new suit out of me."

"Shucks, I've tried to tell you it's not murder."

"Give me the lowdown."

"There isn't any," said Burns, chewing off the end of a fresh cigar, and fumbling in his pocket for a match. "Being in the movies, you probably don't realize that some people die without being murdered, but it can happen, honest. Of course, I haven't anything but the report to go on, but it seems pretty clear. The girl went out in a sailboat, alone, at six o'clock this morning—"

"At this point," I said, "I stop and laugh. I know Paula as well as anybody. She couldn't sail a cake of soap in a bathtub, and she hated water so much she wouldn't even use it for a chaser. If there ever was a woman who wasn't the outdoor type, it was Paula. Besides, the guy who could get her up at that time in the morning could talk Mr. Molotoff out of the veto."

"You're following the murder theory, Doc?"

THERE wasn't any use putting myself on the spot, and I didn't have any facts to go on. I asked about the sailboat.

"Wumpelmeyer, the watchman at the dock, where Mr. Kapilow's yacht is parked, saw a girl get into it. Captain Deskins, who commands the *Cynara*, said a squall blew up shortly afterward. It didn't last long, but it could have given an inexperienced sailor trouble. He noticed the sailboat yawning about in the wind, and sent out a couple of men. Nobody was in the boat. My theory is that the boom knocked Miss Lee into the water."

That was reasonable enough, if Paula had been in the boat. Though I didn't say anything about it to Jimmy Burns, it seemed strange to me that both witnesses were employees of Mr. Kapilow's, particularly in view of the fact that Mr. Kapilow had said he would get tough if Paula tried to blackmail him. Besides, my boss had certainly been out with her last night.

By this time we had reached the dock. Two policemen and a police surgeon were standing by Paula's body. I looked down at the girl in her diaper trunks and scanty brassiere. She certainly had known how to take care of her body, in spite of the rather rugged life she led. I noticed a smear of dried blood on her forehead.

"How about that?" I asked the man of medicine, who was a pudgy little man, with a bristling mustache.

"It seems reasonably simple to me," he said. "As Lieutenant Burns agrees, the boom probably hit her. Such a blow might have knocked her unconscious, or even caused a slight concussion, but it certainly could not have caused her death. This woman unquestionably drowned."

"You may be a good doctor," I said, "but you're a bust as a detective!"

The police surgeon bristled like a mother hen protecting her chickens.

"I want you to know—" he began, but I didn't pay any attention to him. Instead, I turned to Jimmy Burns.

"When you told me Paula was dead, Jim," I said, "I had a hunch she was murdered. Now I know it."

"How do you know it?"

THRILLING DETECTIVE

I knelt down beside Paula's body, and pointed to the cut on her head. "Look at that. I'll admit the wound could have been made by a swinging boom, but if she had been knocked into the ocean, the blood would have been washed away!"

"By the Lord Harry, you're right!" exclaimed Detective Lieutenant Burns. "Then, it was murder!"

"It's my idea," I went on, "that Paula was beaten into unconsciousness and salt water poured down her throat, so it would seem she had drowned. Then, her body was left here on the beach."

Burns looked at me reverently. "Boy," he said, "you're a better detective than most of the men in my division. Have you any idea who might have done this?"

"Paula had more boy friends than King Solomon had wives," I said. "Trying to sift the killer out of that mob might develop into a career. But, look, Jim, doesn't one thing strike you as significant?"

"What, in particular?"

"The witnesses, man, the witnesses. If Paula was murdered, they must have been lying. They didn't see her get into the sailboat. I'd bet my life on that. And, they wouldn't be lying for the fun of it."

Jimmy Burns stared at me.

"Okay, Hercule Poirot," he said, "what goes from there?"

I thought: Why, you dope, even a cop should see that, since these witnesses work for Kapilow, and couldn't have seen what they said they saw, they must be trying to cover him up. Or, is it against the law in Hollywood to suspect a producer of murder?

"You're the detective," I said. "I'm just a script writer on a vacation. Besides, we have a bet. You take it from here on."

Burns lighted a cigarette. "Doc," he said, "if you think Mr. Kapilow killed that girl, you're wrong!"

That hit me right between the eyes.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"If the addition isn't more than two and two, I can count it up," Burns said. "I know as well as you do that Wumpelmeyer and Deskins work for Mr. Kapilow. I know he was afraid Paula might blackmail him because he told me about

it. But he left his house at five-fifteen this morning to drive to Burbank for the plane to New York, so he couldn't have killed her. As for the witnesses, they could be telling the truth, you know. The watchman saw a girl getting into a boat. He didn't say she was Paula Lee. When the body was found, he might have assumed she was the one he had seen earlier. As for Deskins, he never had a glimpse of the woman. All he did was send out a couple of men, when he saw the boat yawning around, out of control."

I WAS glad if Kapilow was in the clear, because I liked the little guy. But, just washing him out didn't get us a step nearer finding out who had killed Paula. I wanted to find out, because I had liked her, too.

"All right," I said, "my boss is innocent. Have you any other suspects?"

"As many as she had boy friends," said Jimmy Burns.

"Like anybody in particular?"

The meat wagon arrived. They lifted Paula Lee's body on a stretcher, and shoved her into it. The police surgeon gave me a dirty look, and went off without saying a word. His feelings were pretty badly hurt. We went back to Jimmy's car, and started back to town.

"What about Ray Keene?" Jimmy asked.

"On the record," I admitted, "Keene would probably knock off anybody, but I don't know why he would kill her. They split up as amicably as two people could, and he gave her money."

"Any other ideas?" Burns probed.

I had, but I didn't tell him. After all, I wanted to solve this crime, and win the bet. Not for the suit. I had plenty of them. I just wanted to show Jimmy Burns that an amateur detective could be as good as a pro.

I asked him to drop me at my house. My car was there.

"Give me a call around dinner time, and let me know what you find out," I suggested. He said he would. I went in, and made some telephone calls.

Then, I climbed into the car and went to see Mrs. Kapilow!

Bernice O'Halloran Kapilow was still a very good looking doll, in spite of the

fact that the golden tint of her hair came out of a bottle, and there were traces of crowsfeet around her eyes.

"Look, Doc," she said, "you have a whale of a nerve waking me up at this time of day."

I went over to the bar, and mixed myself a bourbon and water.

"Paula Lee was murdered this morning," I said.

Mrs. Kapilow fixed her mouth with a lipstick, though it looked all right to me.

"It's about time," she said. "That cat had it coming to her ever since Roosevelt was elected. What's the idea of this conversation? You don't think I killed her, do you?"

I took a long slug of the bourbon.

"That's exactly what I do think," I said, "and I'll give you reasons why. You were jealous of your husband, and hated Paula Lee.. There's the motive. You were out all night. There's the opportunity."

"You couldn't convict me of blowing bubble gum on evidence like that," Bernice said scornfully.

"I know, but there's more. I checked with the studio, and they said Mr. Kapilow didn't leave there until midnight. Yet, Luis Benedetti told me your husband had a date with Paula, and Wumpelmeyer said they went aboard the *Cynara*. That wasn't true. Why should they lie about it? It isn't hard to deduce. You backed Benedetti in his night club, as a little sideline, and Wumpelmeyer was your gardener for years before he took that watchman's job. It wouldn't be hard for you to get to either of them. And, you can bet your lipstick, baby, it won't be hard to make them admit it, either, if they are accused as accessories to murder.

Bernice O'Halloran Kapilow lighted a cigarette. "Why should I do that?"

"Because," I said, "if the murder was discovered, you wanted to have it pinned on your husband! That's how bitter you were. I passed up the idea that Paula Lee was trying to blackmail him. She wasn't the type. And, besides, Kappy wouldn't kill a mouse. Who did you pay to knock Paula off?"

Bernice's voice was as dry as chalk when she spoke. "You're crazy, Doc. Sure, I hated Paula, and I'm not shed-

ding tears because she's dead. But, I didn't kill her."

The butler entered.

"Madame," he said, "Police Lieutenant Burns is here to see you."

"Good," I told him. "Bring him in." A moment later Jimmy's bulky form blocked the doorway. "How's your bank balance?" I asked.

"All right, I guess. Why?"

"Because you'll have to buy me a new suit."

BURNS looked a little crestfallen.

"Then, you've solved the case, too?"

"Too? Have you?"

"Certainly. Simple, wasn't it?"

"That's the way it seemed to me. Knowing what I did, I just made a couple of 'phone calls, and deduced that she had done it."

Burns lit a fat cigar. He seemed a little puzzled. "She? Whom do you mean?"

"Why, Mrs. Kapilow, of course."

Jimmy sat down heavily. "So, you did all this by deduction, huh?"

"Practically."

"Let me tell you something, Doc," he said. "That Sherlock Holmes stuff is great in the movies, but in real life leg work pays off better. I'll hand it to you that you spotted the murder, but from then on you've been off the beam. Mrs. Kapilow didn't have any more to do with killing Miss Lee than I did."

"All right, legman," I said. "Who did?"

"We'll get to that. Before I talked with Deskins and Wumpelmeyer, I checked the weather bureau. They said there hadn't been a squall at the time Deskins said he saw the empty boat. Instead, there was a thick fog. That made him a liar, and I wanted to find out why. Had he done the killing, or was he covering somebody else? It didn't take more than three minutes to make him admit that Benedetti had made him tell the story. Then, I took hold of Luis. He's just as soft underneath as the yacht captain, and sang right away."

"What was his tune?" I asked wearily.

"Well, it seems," Burns went on, "that Ray Keene planned to blackmail Mr. Kapilow through Paula, and Benedetti was part of the scheme. When she re-

(Concluded on page 77)

When a New York reporter

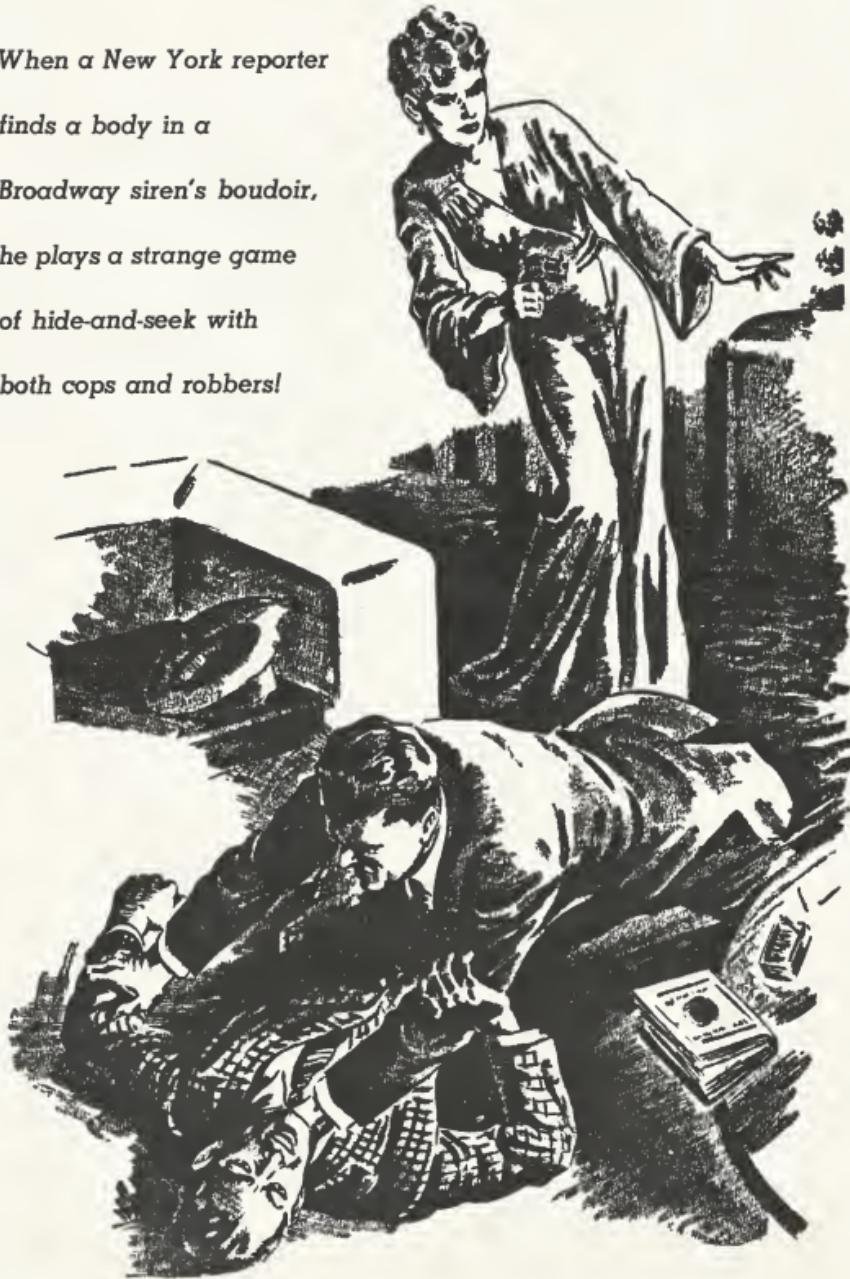
finds a body in a

Broadway siren's boudoir,

he plays a strange game

of hide-and-seek with

both cops and robbers!



While Gilda held the gun on Louie, Esthay
got me by the throat, and the air went out
of my lungs.



THIS WILL KILL YOU

By C. S. MONTANYE

CHAPTER I

DATE WITH THE GIRL FRIEND

IT WAS one of those rainy autumn nights when you seemed to be looking at the blurred lights of Broadway through an even half dozen Scotchies and sodas. Getting a taxi was as easy as trying to get gracious language from a harried head waiter.

I snapped up the collar on my leak-proof slicker and headed for Dufrey's on leather. That inhospitable lift-and-drain tuckaway was half down 45th Street, a pebble's toss from the Imperial Theater. Why Libby Hart, the principal charac-

ter in my dreams, had designated that as a meet-me-there-at-nine rendezvous was a bigger question than the Middle East.

But Mrs. Hart's only girl child had laid it on the line and didn't like arguments. So, when I checked out of the *Orbit*, that high class newspaper for which I concocted various sporting page pieces, there was nothing to do but duck the drops and keep the date.

Dufrey's, dressed up to represent an Old World Sicilian grotto, was no place for a lady like Libby to be waiting for anybody.

Its customers were the flower of the underworld, a mob of not so nice smell-

A COMPLETE JOHNNY CASTLE NOVELET

ing tiger lilies. I had reason to know that Brian Esthay, one of the town's toughest muscle men, owned the major slice of Dufrey's and made it his headquarters.

In the few times I'd been there the faces of the patrons had haunted my nightmares. I walked faster, trying to beat the gal friend to its doorstep.

But there wasn't any need to hurry. Libby was a charter member of the Ladies Never On Time Association. When I went past the circular bar in the front room there was no sign of her. Nor in the Florentine Room in the rear. Or in the foyer, or emerging from the powder room.

I took a short beer to a table and sat down. Over to the left Brian Esthay was dining a couple of pals. Esthay, a big, benevolent mug with a face like a friendly St. Bernard, was laughing heartily at one of his own gags.

Esthay was always laughing. Around the Main Stem he had a reputation for his constant good humor, wisecracks and witticisms, charity and unfailing memory for friends, near and far.

ONE of the "far" ones, I recalled, happened to be Dolf Callise, a deadpanned young gentleman who had acquired the unhappy habit of borrowing jewelry from wealthy people and forgetting to return it.

In fact, Callise seldom asked for the loans. He simply dropped in when the folks were out and helped himself.

He had done that in the case of a Mrs. Randall Westcott. That wealthy dowager maintained a fourteen-room Park Avenue dude ranch. Mrs. W, through Callise's visit, found herself minus a collection of jeweled trinkets insured for a mere sixty grand.

Callise promptly disappeared from the Rialto scene and I had reason to believe that big, amusing Brian Esthay was suspected by those in the know of having not only arranged Dolf Callise's departure to an unknown address, but had profited by the Westcott glitter.

I could feel him looking at me. I finished the beer and looked back. Esthay nodded and called out:

"Come on over and sit in with us, Castle. Why the lone wolf stuff?"

I said, "Waiting for my fiancee."

"Bring her over when she shows up, if she does," he replied. "Personally," he guffawed, "I can't imagine any dame meeting you."

"You mean—here?" I said, and he laughed harder.

A radio made thin, twittery music. The drinkers at the bar clinked their glasses and fifteen minutes seemed like fifteen minutes. I stole a peek at Esthay's pals. Not good—hard looking jobs with small amounts of chin and eyes sharp enough to shave with.

The kind that would break your arm without hesitation and then tell you to go and have it gift-wrapped.

"Hello, Johnny. I'm terribly sorry I'm late. This rain and everything delayed me. You understand, angel."

Libby sat down before I could get up.

"Don't use the word angel in here. Too many people have been measured for wings. And why," I inquired, "did you select a place like this in the first place?"

"Because," she answered, giving me one of her widest smiles, "I have to meet a man here."

"You've met him."

"Not *you*, silly. Another man. Buddy."

"Buddy?"

"Bohen. He's a sunburned sailor. You see," Libby explained, when a waiter finally nodded over and I said 'old-fashioned,' and didn't mean his Tuxedo coat, "this Buddy Bohen works on a ship called the *Star of Brazil*. He's just up from a cruise to South America and he's going to give me a lot of material for an article I'm about to write for *Happy Vacation*, that periodical that tells you where to go in nice language."

"A sunburned sailor." I looked hard at her. "Where'd you dig him up? Or did you just tear the ship apart and there he was?"

"If you think what I'm thinking you're thinking," Libby said frostily, "you're entirely wrong, cream-puff. I was introduced to Buddy by Joe Giff and I've known Joe since I was knee high to a bar stool."

BRIAN ESTHAY caught my eye. He pointed at Libby with a bony forefinger. I shook my head. He went into

a spasm of laughter and Libby raised her arched brows.

"What's funny, Johnny? What's the man laughing at?"

"The story about the dentist who made his patients pay through the teeth," I said. "For your information that's Brian Esthay. He's one of Manhattan's number one bad men."

"He's cute." Libby looked over. "And those people with him."

"Members of the human race, believe it or not," I said.

"I don't."

The drinks arrived and we put some of the outside chill back where it belonged. Libby was at her loveliest. She looked sleek and polished. Her dark hair was high lighted to the brimless twenty-two dollars' worth of hatless hat on her softly waved tresses. Her eyes, like misty stars, hid behind long lashes. Her mouth was the color of ripe strawberries and her skin held a golden glow.

In her simple little black dress she looked good enough to eat with a spoon. I was willing to back her as a sure winner in any beauty derby, against the field!

"Curious," she said, looking at a clock over the bar door. "Buddy said he'd be here at eight-forty-five. If he doesn't show up I'm to go to his apartment. That's why I wanted you to meet me—to go with me."

"Sunburned sailors with apartments, in a housing shortage. It doesn't come out even."

"This does," said Libby. "It's his sister's place and she's in Michigan."

She went on to tell me more about the setup, but I wasn't listening.

AT THAT minute a girl had come in from the foyer and was heading for Brian Esthay.

She was a frail, beautiful blonde. Hair the color of strained honey was done in a swirl on her shapely little head. As she passed I got a flash of violet colored eyes, a tiptilted nose and a full-lipped, tantalizing mouth.

She wore a party dress, something with spangles in it and a couple of diamond bracelets that lit her arm up like the stage of the Music Hall. High heels tapped on the tiled floor. When she went

KILL YOU

past she left a trail of perfume in her wake.

"*Stratosphere*," Libby murmured, sniffing the scent. "Thirty dollars an ounce and you smell to high heaven. Who is she, Johnny?"

"Gilda Gulden," I answered, automatically. "One of Esthay's lightweight feminine acquaintances. She circulates at the Forty-Four Club and shoots people in her spare time."

Libby fished the cherry out of the bottom of her glass, looked at the clock again and said, "Let's go up to Buddy's apartment. I don't like it here, too much competition. I never could tangle with a blonde and manage to keep *your* eyes in place."

I paid the bar check and we passed out into the rain.

CHAPTER II

HEEL AND TOE



HIS TIME I had better luck. There was an empty cab in front of Dufrey's. The hackie was about to make off when I stopped him and helped Libby Hart in.

She supplied an address in the West Fifties while I shut the door and sat down beside her.

The minute I did I got a whiff of perfume, the same aroma Gilda Gulden had exuded not many minutes before. Then, I thought, this was the taxi she had arrived in. I looked at the chauffeur's photograph and name on the license in the slot facing the rear seat while Libby took off her slippers and pulled her nylons out at the toes.

"You'll like Buddy," she said confidently. "He has the most thrilling blue eyes."

"Two?"

"You don't have to be sardonic—or jealous." Libby laughed under her breath. "After all, we're not married yet."

"A sunburned sailor with blue eyes." I shuddered, and kissed her. "Don't mind me. If your literary career means tackling tars at this late hour, I'm with you all the way."

"Good old Johnny," Libby whispered,

and kissed me back.

In about twenty minutes we had fought the battle of the red lights and were in front of an ordinary apartment house on an ordinary street.

"Shall I wait?" the hackie queried.

I gave him a buck and sent him on his way. Then I followed Libby into a vestibule and lighted matches so she could see the names in a battery of mail-boxes.

"Here it is, Johnny. Mrs. Herbert Hotchkiss. Apartment One D. First floor, no doubt."

She used a manicured fingertip on the bell, but that wasn't really necessary. The door was open. I held it wide and led the way down a corridor, toward the rear. The alphabet painted on the imitation fireproof doors went as far as D, where we stopped.

There was no one around. From the floors above a faint, cacophonous medley of all apartment house sounds blended into one and came down the well of the stairs.

Like the front hall door that of 1D was hospitably ajar. Light, dim and subdued, came through its aperture. Libby rang the bell and then called through the door:

"Buddy! Oh, Buddy. May we come in?"

There was no answer. Her dark eyes rolled in my direction.

"Maybe he's below deck," I said. "Or catching twenty winks in his hammock. Let's cruise in and see."

A small entry hall opened onto a regulation living room. That was where the light came from. A tall, metal floor lamp stood in one corner. It boasted four bulbs but only one was turned on. Libby paused beside me while I looked around.

The room was as empty as the average chorine's head.

"He probably stepped out to mail a letter or get his shoes shined." I waved a hand at a nearby divan. "Might as well sit down and sweat it out."

A trifle doubtfully the girl friend arranged her skirt on the green upholstered furniture I designated. I wandered around, looking at Mrs. Hotchkiss' knickknacks, until I reached a short passage.

I stopped there.

On one side was the bath. On the

other, the open door of what was undoubtedly the apartment's bedroom. The subdued light from the tall lamp just about lasted until it got to the sill.

In its faint shine I saw a shoe. The peculiar thing about it was that its heel was on the floor and its toe pointed straight to the ceiling!

There was a foot in it. The foot was attached to a leg and the leg was covered with dark blue cloth. I moved a step closer and took a better gander. What I saw turned me around and walked me back to Miss Hart.

"Before you step outside and faint," I said, "make a note to tell the editor of *Happy Vacation* your article will be temporarily held up. From here on in this is strictly a newspaper job. I'm sorry to say that your sailor's thrilling blue eyes are closed, forever!"

LIBBY jumped up with a strangled exclamation. "Johnny! You don't—"

"I do! Sit tight while I investigate further and don't look. I won't be long."

I wasn't.

With a handkerchief to keep my prints quiet. I flicked on the wall switch. Bohem, if it was Bohem, lay flat on his back between a maple bed and a three-mirrored dressing table. He had leaked gore on the plain taupe carpet. That was natural inasmuch as somebody had been at work on his curly head with either a sap or the butt of a gun!

I hadn't been exactly authentic about his eyes being closed. They weren't. They were wide and staring, filled with the vague emptiness of death. When I bent closer I saw they were blue, a deep blue that matched his nautical outfit. And he was sunburned, tanned to a rich mahogany shade which even the handiwork of the Grim Reaper hadn't been able to fade out.

Both his arms were flung wide. There hadn't been any battle prior to his passing. The room was neat and orderly, a place for everything and everything in it.

Evidently Bohem had been washed out with eclat and finesse!

Rain pattered against the windows. I stood there sniffing the motionless air. It might have been imagination but the same scent I had first caught at Dufrey's

and then in the taxi seemed faint on the atmosphere!

I looked around curiously. Often in the past I had run into murder. Usually there was a clew or two about, something to stumble across which, in the end, hung it on the guilty party.

But the bedroom had nothing to offer. Only the dead sailor, the ooze on the carpet and that reminiscent perfume, if I wasn't imagining it.

I went back to the frightened Libby and nodded at her wide-eyed stare.

"Curly hair?" I asked. "Sort of brownish?" and she nodded back.

There was a telephone handy. I picked that up and dialed a familiar number. A few minutes later the ice water voice of my old pal, Captain Fred Mullin of Homicide, drifted harshly across the wire. As usual, Mullin sounded annoyed. He sounded more than that when I spoke my piece.

"Castle, of the *Orbit*, Captain. I want to report a murder!"

I held my hand over the receiver end of the phone so Libby couldn't hear what he roared. When he cooled a bit, I gave him the name and address and hung up.

"Can we go now, Johnny?" The girl friend shivered again and looked in the direction of the bedroom.

"You can. I've got to stick and greet the chief. By the way, you spoke of Bohem's friend, a Joe Giff. Remember where he hangs out?"

Libby frowned. "I don't know where he lives but Buddy said Joe did most of his tea tasting at Cliff Maddigan's Club Forty-Four."

I got her to the door, divided more osculation in two equal parts and sent her on her way with a promise to buzz her apartment the minute Mullin was through with me.

"And don't tell anybody you were here, Lib. I'm not having you hooked into this. Powder now and I'll see you later."

She blew and I went back to the telephone. This time I called the paper. While I was talking to the city desk I noticed something glimmering on the carpet to the left of the divan.

After I had finished gabbing with Bill Jamison, the *Orbit's* specialist in all forms of murder and mayhem, I put the

telephone back and went across the room.

The thing that glimmered was a tiny round piece of yellow glass. I put it in the palm of my hand and let it blink at me. Then I tucked it in a vest pocket and a few minutes after that listened to the wail of a police car siren in the street.

CAPTAIN MULLIN and his Homicide Squad gumheeled in, Mullin in the vanguard, jaw protruding. The chief wasn't in an amiable frame of mind. He seldom was when I happened to be around. I seemed to curdle Mullin. As he did me. Which was strange because, in the final analysis, the Captain was a good cop.

He had climbed to power, bulldozing his way up from a beat on Staten Island, using the old fashioned tried and true methods of beating confessions out of suspects and hosing his pickups into lap dog submission. But with all that the Captain had rung the bell on several tough cases, playing it lucky as well as safe.

He glowered at me as I led the way to the bedroom.

"In again, Castle. What do you do, front for a funeral parlor? Everytime I hear from you, you've got a corpse up your sleeve."

"I've got big sleeves," I said pleasantly.

Mullin's fishy eyes played over me like a couple of scalpels. "Yeah? Well, be careful you don't fall out of one some day."

I stood aside in the little hall and waved a hand.

"Help yourself, Captain. It's all yours!"

Detectives Larry Hartley and Ed Wheeler, two of Mullin's trained seals, barged in. The captain turned a smile into a sneer. He jabbed a finger in my direction.

"I'll take care of you later, Castle. Park it somewhere and get your facts straight. You're gonna do a lot of oratory when I'm finished here."

I went back to the divan. Ten minutes later "Doc" Nesbitt, the department's star medical examiner, yawned a way in and went to work. From where

I sat I could hear him talking to Mullin: "This guy's been dead about four hours. The amount of adrenalin produced in the blood of a person by intense fear may be so excessive that, when he is struck down, it will contract his blood vessels and arrest the hemorrhage. That causes coagulation to take place about three to five times faster than when fear does not precede the injury."

"Yeah?" said Mullin. "What makes you think this guy was scared, Doc? With that smile on his pan."

"I didn't say he was. I merely stated a fact." Nesbitt loomed up in the door. "I'll have the basket up in a little while, after I sign the papers. Right?"

He snapped his bag and grinned at me. Then Mullin flatfooted into the living room and over to the divan.

"All right, Castle. Start talking."

It was almost an hour later before I got out of the place. It was still raining. Rain as cold as cheap hotel coffee.

I found an empty taxi and climbed in.

"Where to, boss?"

"Club Forty-Four," I told the driver. "And keep your wheels on the ground."

CHAPTER III

GUYS WITH GUNS



LUB FORTY-FOUR was well illuminated. So were a lot of its patrons. It was one of those hurdy-gurdy resorts, where the customer was always the monkey and the liquor Communistic, divided equally with water so no one would get too much.

I had a nodding acquaintance with Evie Something-or-Other. She was a friend of Beth Wheaton, my favorite switchboard operator at the office. Evie sold cigarettes and cigars out of a ribbon-decked basket. The grift must have been good.

The kid had an order in for a Cadillac coupe—if and when.

I found her sorting her merchandise in the sub-foyer. She had little russet curls, greenish eyes and a tight-lipped smile. Evie knew the book and kept to the text.

Mr. Castle!" she exclaimed, when I

rolled over. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for information," I said. "Know a party by the name of Giff, Joe Giff?"

Evie wrinkled her nose. "That big deck swabber? Sure. What about him?"

"Would he be around?"

She shook her curls.

"Not so far."

"You're sure about that?"

"Sure I'm sure. The first thing he does when he gets here is to make a pass at me."

"I've got ten bucks to trade for his address. Or his phone number. Or a point-out."

"I don't know where he holes in, Mr. Castle. I can't tell you how to get him on the chicory, either. But I can give you a knockdown if he shows up." She laughed under her breath. "Do you know what Joe called me last night? I can't figure what he meant. He said I was a human gimme pig. What do you suppose he meant?"

I told her I didn't have the slightest idea and asked her to page me if Giff appeared. Then I nickeled a way into a telephone booth and called Libby Hart's apartment.

She had gotten in and was all right. I dosed her with what had happened after she had left the Hotchkiss mortuary and was just hanging up when through the glass door I caught a glimpse of two people coming in.

One was the jocund Brian Esthay, the other the frail blond Gilda Gulden, who was hanging on his arm.

Esthay got rid of his skimmer and flogger at the coat check counter. He must have told the babe in charge some gag because she laughed fifty cents' worth and handed him a brass check. Esthay and the dame were ceremoniously conducted to a reserved table. I opened the booth door and saw Evie wig-wagging from the mezzanine stairs.

First she pointed several times in the direction of a big lug who had just barged in. Then Evie held up ten significant fingers. I okayed it and went after the one she pointed at.

"Mr. Giff?"

He looked surprised. "I'm him. Why?"

"The name's Castle. I'm a friend of

Miss Hart who's a friend of Bohem. Who, I'm told, was a friend of yours." "What do you mean—was?"

I towed him into a nearby smoking room and shut the door. In his first mate's uniform Joe Giff looked as large as one of the downtown skyscrapers. You could almost see him lifting a ship when the barnacles had to be scraped.

He had lots of face, not much hair and a Rock of Gibraltar jaw. He looked at me suspiciously. I told him to sit down and let him have it, briefly.

"So Buddy's gone?" He made a noise in his throat, opening and closing his hands. "Show me the one who did it and I'll save the State electricity! A right guy and they knock him off no sooner than he's ashore! They warned me about this slab. They told me it was a tough town. Now I've lost my best pal and forty bucks. He owed me that out of the last dice game on board."

I ASKED questions. Giff liked to talk. He spun a long drawn-out yarn about some town in Brazil tagged Santander, which I found interesting after he went into minute details.

As Giff's story unfolded it began to tie in with what had happened that night at the Hotchkiss apartment across town. It wasn't entirely crystal-clear, but it made plenty of sense. Any guy with the ordinary amount of imagination could twist it around and make it come out even.

I tried, while Giff talked.

"And that's about all," he finally wound up.

"That'll do. Thanks. Now tell me something else. You introduced Bohem to Miss Hart? How did you happen to know her?"

Giff laughed. "Me and Lib? We were neighbors back home. Her folks knew mine. I knew Lib when she was in the third grade. I used to carry her books, and the torch. Swell gal, Lib."

"I believe you implicitly," I said, opening the smoking room door.

"I guess I'd better wire Buddy's sister," Giff murmured. "After I buy a deck of cigarettes."

He went on the prowl for Evie and I took his information to a table in the rear and mulled it over. I was still doing

that when I noticed Esthay and the blonde get up and head for the lobby, the gal in the lead.

Esthay wasn't smiling or laughing now. He looked as serious as meningitis. They passed my table and I heard him saying:

"Now, don't get peeved, baby. I was only kidding. Listen, you can't powder on me!"

"Can't I?" Gilda said. "Try and stop me!"

I paid the overhead and bee-lined for the street. Brian Esthay was coming back from the curb. A taxi was pulling away from it. I didn't know whether Esthay recognized me or not. I didn't care. I had one ambition and sprinted to achieve it.

The clock-ark was going into second gear when I ripped open the door and joined Gilda on the rear seat.

She let out a strangled cry and swung a couple of fists in my direction. I ducked and pushed her back on the seat. The chauffeur twisted around with a what's-this-about look.

"It's okay, pally," I assured him. "You know how dames are. They walk out on you."

"Sure," he said, and closed the glass partition.

The blonde found her voice. It was all choked up with anger and indignation.

"What's the meaning of this outrage? Who are you?"

"Headquarters, honey." I tried to make it sound professional and opened my coat at vest height to let her see a badge that wasn't there. "Just a few questions, after you tell me where you're going."

The way I said it tamed her a trifle. She relaxed against the worn upholstery, peering at me through the gloom. Her perfume was overpowering at close range.

After a minute she said, "I'm on my way home. So what?"

"So we'll talk when we get there. Much better than this rattletrap."

It wasn't far. Up half a dozen blocks and over one. I dug for the meter toll and followed her into a self-service elevator in the narrow entry hall of an apartment house that wasn't cheap or expensive.

Gilda jabbed at a button numbered "3" and violet-eyed me as the lift went up.

"I've seen you around. You're no cop!"

I let that go and got out on the third floor. She fished a key from a soft velvet bag, opened a bag and turned on lights. More of the perfume smacked me when we were in the bandbox living room of her place.

A FAIRLY large room with colored photographs of her all over the walls. In a bathing suit at Atlantic City. In rompers on the farm. In spangles at Miami. In tweeds at the Plaza. Her rougish gallery showed every angle, as well as every curve.

I let the daguerreotypes ride and looked at the living Gilda. I liked the smartly designed gown, the Delman stilt-heeled booties with their ornate decorations, rolled over tongues studded with yellow stones.

Those stones were bits of glass the same color as the piece I had in my vest pocket. And that piece, I saw in the next glance, was an exact fit for the empty space in the left slipper's tongue. There was a vacancy there that made a positive link for the scent I had breathed in at Mrs. Hotchkiss's.

"Now, what's the gimmick?" She asked it petulantly, her pretty face mask-blank.

"I want to return this." I took out the piece of yellow glass and gave it to her. "Off your cute little brogan. You might have a job matching it."

The violet eyes hid behind crinkly lashes. She tried to stay bland but a muscle in her white throat twitched and betrayed her.

"Where—where did you get it?"

"On the floor, not far from the dead body of Buddy Bohem. Remember him?"

Gilda sat down. She didn't exactly sit—she seemed to collapse loosely in a chair. The long lashes flew up and her eyes stared at me, wide, wondering and full of fear.

"It's a gag! He—you don't mean—it can't be—"

I let her sputter out and shrugged. "Unfortunately for Mr. Bohem, it is true. Whether it's unfortunate for you is go-

ing to depend on what you say. Let's have it."

She began to get foxy. Instead of blurting out explanations she drew into herself. Only her white, slender fingers kept weaving together in her silk lap. She coughed and bent forward.

"I haven't anything to say to you! You're no dick. I've pegged you now. You're a newspaper reporter. I don't talk to newspaper reporters. You can bow yourself out, smart guy! There's the door. Use it!"

"I'll try the phone instead." I moved toward one that stood on a little three-tier bookcase in the corner. "Murder might be amusing to you, but the folks at Centre Street have other ideas."

But I didn't dial the number.

As I lifted the telephone off its prongs I heard the click of a key turning in a lock. A door opened, a draught of air blew against my angles. A couple of people came in and one of them said authoritatively:

"Hold it, kid! Put that telephone back and let's see how high you can reach."

Brian Esthay, a large piece of artillery featured in his right hand, and pointed in my direction, laughed under his breath as he came deeper into the room.

A step behind him, I had a narrow-eyed glimpse of one of the two thugs who had been with Esthay at Dufrey's earlier that evening.

He, like the big man with him, was clutching a gun and peering at me, a vicious, twisted grin on his shapeless mouth.

I laid the telephone gently back in its cradle and obediently elevated both arms.

CHAPTER IV

ROGUES' GALLERY



ESTHAY walked over to me. He took a good squint and shoved his rod back in his belt. The amusement went out of his horse-type face. He blinked once or twice.

"Why, Castle. This is funny. This is really funny!"
"Where's the joke?" I asked, while

Esthay made a sign to the super-mouse with him to lay off and hide the firearms.

"I turned around, after Gilda left me, and got a curbside view of somebody crashing her cab. It didn't look good. From where I stood it sort of seemed like a stick-up. Naturally I was worried. Naturally I had to pick up Louie and drop around to see what it's all about."

Blondie spoke for the first time. "Now you've seen, so take the air!" Her tone was as brittle as spring ice. Her violet eyes had turned a deep purple and her red mouth had contracted.

"Aw, baby," Esthay started, measuring out the syrup. "I'm sorry about what I said. You know I trust you. I was only kidding."

He would have said something else but the golden-haired Gilda laughed in his face.

"I know how much you were kidding. Why don't you grow up and crawl out of the comic section!" She turned her gaze on me. "And get rid of this late edition. He doesn't give me any appetite, either."

It was a good suggestion. I reached for my hat, Louie watching me speculatively. Esthay laughed loudly.

"Not sore, Castle? It's all in fun. Me trying to protect the little woman." He shook with mirth. "Remind me to tell you the one about the guy who was keeping an eye on his gal friend and his pal at the same time. You'll go into stitches."

I put on my hat and took a couple of steps toward the door. The Gulden dame stared at me stonily. Louie's twitching fingers ran up and down the front of his coat. Esthay, a big grin on his pan, watched me go.

"By the way, Castle," he said, when I reached the door. "I've got a Police Department permit for this gun. So has Louie."

I shut the door behind me and went down the stairs fast.

The first person I met when I got back to my own two rooms and shower, a whistle away from the Winter Garden, was Detective Hartley. Larry smoked the best cigar a nickel ever bought and was waiting in the front seat of a prowler car. He had evidently been there for some time, which hadn't sugared his disposition much.

"Climb in, Castle." He threw the cigar in the gutter and opened the door.

"What now, officer?" I asked.

"The Chief. He's not satisfied with your story. He craves more conversation. Hop in and don't give me an argument. I've been staked out here for the better part of an hour."

I got in beside him.

Twenty minutes later I was in Mullin's office on Centre Street. The Captain looked a trifle worn around the edges, but his sneer was bright and polished and his fishy eyes still without any trace of human warmth.

"What's on your mind, Captain?" I made it sound chummy and sat down beside his desk in a chair that needed dusting.

"You!" Mullin answered. "You haven't come clean with me, Castle. You're holding something back. I know you. You'd double-cross your grandmother."

"I haven't any." I kept my tone light and pleasant, full of sunshine and flowers. "What do you mean, I'm holding back?"

"Your story creaks," Mullin said.

"Since meeting you last," I continued, "I've run into a few interesting facts. Care to hear them, Captain?"

THE PALE gray eyes began to glitter. Mullin straightened up in his desk chair. "Yeah, what are they?"

I went back to Joe Giff's yarn as delivered in the smoking room at the Forty-Four.

"Bohen had plenty of dough of his own," I began. "Ten thousand bucks' worth, I've just learned from a shipmate of his. Remember that. The boat they were on docked at Santander. That's a banana port in Brazil."

"Never mind the local color. Get to the facts."

"Bohen had some business with a guy at Santander. He met him the first night he went ashore. And when he came back to the *Star of Brazil*, he didn't have his ten grand. But he didn't say what he had done with it."

"Probably dropped it in some gambling joint," Mullin said. "What else?"

"Bohen didn't tell his pal any of the particulars. He was forty bucks short

when the ship docked at the Erie Basin. He dropped that in a dice game to the party who handed me this fable. Another thing; Bohem was followed away from the pier when he left the boat. He told his friend that."

Mullin curled an upper lip when I finished. The sneer he wore increased its shape and size.

"What kind of dream stuff is that, Castle? I'm looking for clews, not fairy tales."

"Okay. I just thought I'd give you a motive. Figure it out. Bohem gets rid of ten thousand bucks in Santander. Guys with murder on their minds are waiting for him in Brooklyn. Add it up."

Mullin rubbed a chin that needed shaving. It gave off a gritty, sandpaper sound.

"You told me you had a date with Bohem to get some dope on a magazine article. That you went up to his sister's apartment to meet him. Since when have you been writing magazine articles."

I had handed him that line to keep Libby out of it. I didn't like the way he threw it back at me.

"Since I traded in my nursing bottle for a four-fifths size. Sure, I'm interested in Bohem's cutdown, but strictly for my sheet. I'm in the newspaper business, first and last."

"Where have you been since you left the Hotchkiss flat?"

That was easy. "Talking to Bohem's pal, Joe Giff, by name, at the Club Forty-Four."

The Captain grunted again. I could see him fumbling around for something to hang on me. He couldn't reach it and shrugged.

"Get this Giff guy down here first thing in the morning. I want to talk to him."

I got up. "Sure. How about doing me a favor, Cap? I'd like to have Giff give the gallery a gander. Just an idea."

"Get him down here early."

I went home and tried to sleep it off. It wasn't so simple. Brian Esthay, the big cannon in his hand, the sweet smelling Gilda and the shoe with its heel on the carpet and its toe pointing straight up, mixed with Libby's frightened dark

eyes, made first class nightmare material.

Dawn was rattling its milk bottles along the street when I finally corked off.

Next morning Bill Jamison came around to my desk at *The Orbit*. Bill had been on the prowl. He needed a shave worse than Mullin had, but his breath was full of flowers. Four Roses.

"The sailor washout is one for the aspirin division." Jamison sat down wearily on the edge of my desk. "And Mullin has shut up like a clam."

"Homicide had to. They don't know any more than you do."

Bill rolled a weary eye in my direction. "Who does know anything? You?"

I TIPPED back and hoisted leather to the desk. "Right. I may be wrong, but I think I've got this bump-off pegged correctly. I think I know the motive and who did it. In a half hour I'm going down to Headquarters with a party who's well hooked into it. What happens there will clinch it or write me off as entirely wrong."

"Spill!" Jamison croaked avidly.

"Later. You've got my promise. I'll phone you the minute the string's around the neck of the bag."

He went away and a couple of minutes later the phone hummed. That happened all day. It was usually some fight promoter with an undiscovered miracle man under his wing, looking for publicity.

Or a member of the free-ticket brigade. Or some visiting basketball celebrity. Or the hockey crowd with exclusive news they wanted to share with all the papers.

Beth Wheaton, the cutie of the long plugs, cooed in my ear:

"I've got a lady on another wire for you, Mr. Castle. Say please."

"How do you know she's a lady?" I answered. "Put her on—please."

I thought it would be Libby, but it wasn't. Gilda Gulden's dulcet tones sounded. And dulcet was the word.

"I want to apologize for last night," she said. "I'm terribly sorry about it."

"That's all right. Think nothing of it. I'm used to playing target for the underworld."

"You see," Gilda continued, "I'd had an argument with Brian and then you came along. I wasn't feeling exactly happy. But I am sorry."

She stopped. I could almost read her mind over the wire.

"You're worried about that piece of yellow glass," I said slowly. "Forget it. That's private between us—if you'd care to explain to me."

"That's exactly why I called you. I do want to explain." Her voice brightened considerably. "Suppose you drop in and see me around five this afternoon."

I could feel my pulses begin to tick like nickel-plated watches. I told her that would be fine, said good-by, hung up and stared at the copy on my desk without seeing it.

Ten minutes after that Libby buzzed me. I made a lunch date with her and got my hat.

Then I picked up Joe Giff and piloted him down to the local crime clinic via subway.

Mullin let Giff lean on his ear for the better part of a half hour. After that, the Captain gave us an Annie Oakley to the Rogues' Gallery. We went over the pictures carefully, one by one.

Joe Giff didn't say anything for quite awhile.

Then, finally, he stuck out his jaw, drew a breath and pointed.

"That's the guy," he announced, a ton of conviction in each word. "That's him!"

CHAPTER V

BAD TEN MINUTES



SO I TOOK the daughter of the Hart family to Marty Keeler's for lunch. It was corned-beef day at Marty's and the cabbage addicts were out in quantity. I managed a table on the balcony with a pigeon's-eye vista of the first and last citizens of Longacre Square, below.

Last night's shock still had Libby down. She was nervous and didn't try to conceal it. I told her about Giff, omitting all references to the girl with the honey-colored hair. And I purposely re-

frained from mentioning my five o'clock appointment with La Gulden.

No use, I decided, throwing another wory on the fire.

Libby pecked at the viands and glanced over at me. "I suppose you're in this murder, up to your ears, Johnny, as usual," she said.

"I'm interested, naturally. You don't walk into a room with a body and forget all about it."

"I suppose," she went on dreamily, "you think you can pull another rabbit out of a hat."

"If I lived in Danbury," I said, "I'd make a hat out of a rabbit. I'm not thinking anything at the moment. So set your little mind at ease and put more pressure on your fork."

"Sometimes," Libby told me, "I wonder if it's the sensible thing to do."

"What, Jewel of my Turban?"

"Marry you." She sighed. "I can see you now getting out of bed in the middle of the night to find a corpse somewhere and have gunmen aiming pistols at you! What a prospect!"

I was five minutes early for the date with the gorgeous Gilda.

Once more I stepped into the dim-sized, self-service elevator, made a pass at button Number Three and started up. Once more I braked in front of Blondie's front door. She answered at the first chime and once more I was in the band-box living room with the colored photos on the walls.

This time I didn't look at them. I looked at Violet Eyes.

Gilda had rigged herself up like Mrs. Astor's favorite steed for the five o'clock *tête-à-tête*. The housecoat she wore looked like something out of *Vogue*. It fitted like the wrapper on a sausage, smooth and without a wrinkle anywhere.

Gilda's feet were bare and Gilda's toenails were beautifully manicured. They peeked out of open-ended wedgies like white mice with red eyes. Her ankles were pretty good, too and her legs something Varga might have drawn in an inspirational moment.

All that combined with the glimmering pale gold hair, the violet eyes and the provocative, tempting mouth had the potency of a rum Collins at ten a. m.

She smoked a cigarette in a long black holder, her smile warm and friendly. She parked me on a spindly settee and asked me how thirsty I was.

"Nothing, thanks. I don't touch the filthy stuff. Let's," I suggested, "get down to cases—murder cases."

Gilda shuddered politely. Across the room was a little electric clock, wedged in among the tintypes in silver frames, on a mahogany table. I could see the topaz hands pointing to three minutes after five exactly.

Gilda let her eyes trail in the direction of the rear door in the room. That was closed. She arranged herself picturesquely in a deep-seated chair across from me and draped one slender ankle over the other.

"It was awfully sweet of you to keep that shoe ornament quiet, Johnny. You don't mind if I call you Johnny, do you?"

"When you say it sounds like music," I murmured. "I've kept it quiet because I'm sure a lovely girl like you couldn't have had anything to do with Buddy Bohem's demise. But," I added, "I know you were at his sister's apartment last night."

GILDA nodded. "For a few minutes. Every time Buddy came back from a cruise he used to champagne me at the Forty-Four. This time he called me up, said he couldn't make it, but that he had a present for me from Haiti, a native girl's bathing suit. He said if I could taxi up to the Hotchkiss's he'd give it to me."

"And you went?"

"Yes. I was only there about ten minutes. When I left he was as alive and healthy as you are." She shuddered again. "Whoever killed him must have come in right after I left. It's terrible! I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about him."

"Neither could I," I told her.

"You're not going to mention the fact I was probably next to the last person to see Buddy alive? You wouldn't do that, Johnny. You wouldn't want me to have a lot of unpleasant publicity, publicity that might ruin my career. I know you wouldn't do that to me."

"Of course not," I assured her.

"That's why I didn't want to talk to

you last night, when I spotted you as a reporter."

"What changed your mind?"

She pursed her full, crimson lips. "I'm not usually rude. After you'd gone I thought it over. I'd much rather have you as a friend, a dear friend, than an enemy."

"Then Esthay didn't have anything to do with it?" I hinted.

"Certainly not. And don't get Brian wrong, Johnny, just because he happened to come in with a gun. As he told you he was protecting me. Really, Brian's so tender hearted he can't cut the pages in a book."

I tried to keep from smiling. "I'm wondering if you found anything up at the apartment last night," she went on. "The paper said you were the first one in there, that you found poor Buddy. You didn't find anything else?"

"Such as?" I asked, and clipped off short, when I heard the door in the back of the room creak open.

"Such as a small package you could put in your hip pocket," Brian Esthay answered, coming in.

Louie was with him, looking more vicious than usual and, doing a double on the previous night, both had their heaters on exhibition, lined up on me!

I looked from Esthay's St. Bernard face which, on occasions, also had an equine resemblance, to Louie and from there over to the glamorous Miss Gulden.

"A frame?" I said, amiably.

Esthay nudged his private gunbearer. Louie told me to stand up and gave me a professional frisk, but he wasn't looking for weapons.

Instead, his quick little hands roved over the lining of my jacket. They took a feel of the belt I was wearing. They passed lightly but thoroughly over all the yardage of my tweeds.

"Nothing," he announced. "Guy's clean."

Brian Esthay began to laugh. A low, chuckling laugh that made Gilda's violet eyes grow suddenly shadowed.

"Look, Castle. Let's understand each other. We've been on a hunt for a certain little package we know the Bohem lad brought up with him from South America. We didn't have time to put in a good hunt for it last night. We have

an idea *you* might have located it, because, otherwise, you would have brayed to Homicide about the glass shoe button you found up there."

I listened carefully, a cold chill beginning to reach from one end of my spine to the other. What Esthay said was practically a confession of murder. That he made it to me was too significant for comfort.

It reeked of the fact he didn't intend I was to live long enough to mention it—to anyone!

"I don't know what you're talking about." I tried to slip some nonchalance into it, but to my own ears it sounded pretty trite.

"Don't let's play games, Castle. Let's talk business. How much?"

I COULD have laughed in his St. Bernard face. How much? As if Brian Esthay would pay off and let me walk out of Gilda's apartment unpunctured!

He must have got what I was thinking. A smile turned the corners of his mouth down. A minute before they had been up.

I looked at the electric clock. Seventeen minutes past five. The palms of my hands were beginning to get damp. So was the back of my neck.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I repeated.

Esthay looked at Louie and shook his head. Gilda still crouched in the chair. Her eyes never left me. She leaned tensely forward. I could see her hands tighten, almost convulsively.

Esthay blew against the barrel of his Smith & Wesson.

"You don't know anything about it? You don't know anything about anything. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Not exactly. For instance," I went on, making a desperate stall for time, "I've figured out the Bohen thing. You used him for a custom-made double-cross, Esthay, one that will go down on the records with a big black mark next to it!"

"Is that right? Let's hear about it."

I snapped at the invitation like a pooch at a shinbone.

"You wanted something your agent in South America had. You turned Sweet

Stuff loose on Bohen." I tossed a glance at the blonde. "You knew that Bohen had some dough, ten thousand bucks, which he'd recently inherited, so Gilda supplied the build-up. All Bohen had to do the next time he was in Santander, Brazil, was to see a certain guy, buy a certain something, bring it back to the States and triple his money."

Louie's ears stuck out like a couple of small umbrellas. Esthay rubbed his nose on the back of a hand. Gilda never moved.

"Go on. Go on, Castle. I think you're warm."

"So Bohen followed the prescription without a slip anywhere. He met your man, closed the deal and went back to his ship. Your man wirelessed you that it was all wrapped up. Then all you had to do was tail Bohen when the *Star of Brazil* steamed into the Erie Basin, tail him, pick your spot and go to work on him with a jack. Easy as that."

Nobody said anything.

"Only," I added, "like all double-X's, something boomeranged. You knocked Buddy off but he wasn't wearing the stuff that night. And now you're worried because he can't tell you where it is and you can't figure who's got it."

"Very logical. Well thought out." Esthay began to laugh softly. "Plenty of brain work, Castle. I suppose your boozin' friends down at Headquarters know all this, too. Or do they?"

"What do you think?"

"I think your newspaper's going to have an opening on its sporting page," he said. "Because, Castle, Louie's going to work you over with a cute little sap he carries up his sleeve. We'll do that in the bathroom where it won't be too messy. Then we'll put you in a trunk I have ready and ship you somewhere."

Louie licked his lips. "Say when, boss!"

"Get up, bright boy!" Esthay chuckled deep in his throat. "Before we step outside, did I tell you the one about the kid who fell out of the balcony? He landed down in the orchestra, broke his neck and—"

Gilda interrupted him. She was on her wedge slippers in the next breath. The violet-colored eyes gleamed dangerously. She whirled around on Esthay,

snarling like a golden tigress.

"No you don't! You're not using my bathroom for an abattoir. You're not killing him on these premises. You dope, he's probably told somebody he was coming here!"

The cold chill had left the vicinity of my spine. I looked at Louie. He was staring open-mouthed, and bad-toothed, at the girl. She was in front of Esthay. Which made it a now-or-never opportunity.

I grabbed it!

I was out of the chair like a quarter horse. I picked up a heavy metal bookend from the table beside me. I let that fly at the front window. It went through it like a six-inch projectile.

Then I got both arms around Gilda Gulden. I remembered something about hiding behind a woman's skirts. This was a new switch, hiding behind a Saks Fifth Avenue housecoat!

She squirmed and let out a smothered scream. I hung on, prying her away from the spot in front of Esthay. She was soft and pliable, all curves and contours. I kept thinking I was lucky Libby wasn't there to see me embracing a strange dame. She tried to kick at my ankles. I didn't even feel her heels. I got her as far as the radio cabinet when Esthay went into action.

"Get behind him, Louie!" he roared.

The little toughie promptly streaked for my left side. Esthay, waiting to use his rod, began to barge in from the right. I couldn't watch both of them at the same time and hang on to Gilda who started to yell and strangle harder.

Like magic a leather-covered billy slid into Louie's hand, probably the same instrument that had supplied Buddy Bohem with a one way ticket to a happier land.

Louie hovered closer and closer, waiting for a spot!

Esthay was snarling something through his nose.

The gun went up when Gilda wrenched herself away from me.

Lead sizzled by my chin, missing it by a hair. Plaster puffed from the wall beyond.

I let Gilda go and made a flying tackle at Esthay!

We hit the floor together—he on top.



CHAPTER VI

SOME TIME LATER

OR a couple of minutes that seemed like a couple of years the comic from Dufrey's tried to scoop my eyes out. In his stumble he had let go of the gun. Gilda had snatched that up and was evidently using it as a persuader on the chinless Louie.

Vaguely, like a voice in a dream, I heard her saying, "Stand still, muscleman! I know how to use these things!"

So that left only Esthay. Which was plenty!

He got me by the throat. The air went out of my lungs like that in a tire running over broken glass, and black spots began to swirl in front of my eyes. My lungs felt as if they were being squeezed flat and rolled out like *crepe suzettes*.

So this, something told me, was the way you died, slowly, painfully, fighting for a gasp of air and not getting it!

I tried to keep slugging him with the hand his knee wasn't on. A butterfly's kick would have been more effective. Then, when blackness was settling down for keeps, the miracle happened.

Esthay let go!

He rolled off me. From ten thousand miles away I heard the Gulden chick telling him to get up and put up! Then I heard other sounds, such as doors being banged open, feet, big and flat, slapping on the floor.

And finally the pleased tone of no one else but Captain Fred Mullin, ten minutes late for the round-up I had phoned him about before hitting for the Gulden lair!

"Look at Castle!" Mullin exclaimed, and it was the first time I'd ever heard a note of pleasure in his voice. "He's practically purple. Throw a pail of water on him, Ed."

* * * * *

I took Libby Hart to dinner, that night, in the Flamingo Room of the nadir, eminently respectable Hotel St. Clair. We had, as a guest, First Mate

Joe Giff of the Coastal Line.

We sat at a table surrounded by people whose ages ranged anywhere from the early sixties to the middle eighties. Musak supplied a faint, murmuring melody, just right to talk above.

I ordered soft food and watched Giff toy with a steak large enough to saddle. Libby ate sparingly and kept her starry dark eyes speculatively on me.

"Quite a town," Giff said, coming up for air and wiping off his chin. "Believe me, Mr. Castle, I'm glad we're sailing with the tide in the morning. I'll take a South American revolution and you can keep your Broadway hatchetmen."

I shrugged. "It's not so bad, Joe. Like a rash it breaks out every so often. And like a rash the police know what the cure is."

"The chair for this Esthay guy and his partners." Giff used his napkin again. "Maybe I helped a little, picking out that photograph this morning. Who did you say it was?"

"Dolf Callise. As I told Miss Hart the other night, Callise had left town with a lot of Mrs. Randall Westcott's hygiene. He kicked out in such a hurry he didn't give Brian Esthay his cut."

"So," Libby put in brightly, "Esthay dreamed up a plan whereby he could get his cut and Callise would have ten thousand American dollars."

"Exactly," I murmured, from the good side of my mouth. "Buddy Bohem bought an attractive box of Mrs. Wescott's diamonds which Callise had unmounted in his spare time. The rest you know."

Giff finished the steak. For a minute I thought he was going after the bone. He pushed his plate aside and grinned. "When the cops began to question me

about Buddy and the package he brought back to the ship that night at Santander," he said, "right away I remembered Buddy had given it to the Purser to lock up in the safe."

"And in the safe it was," I told the girl friend. "All ready for Customs, and the insurance company, to take charge of."

SHE looked at me for a moment, in silence.

"Which is a much better place for it than in Mr. Esthay's coat pocket," Libby said, seriously. She frowned a little. "What's going to happen to the blond girl with the violet-colored eyes?"

"What always happens to blondes?"

Joe Giff thought that over for a minute or two. "They get away with murder!" he decided.

"But Gilda didn't actually have a manicured finger in Bohem's departure," I told him. "She'll get something, but not too much. You know how juries are where—ah—limbs are concerned."

"And he's not talking about trees," Libby said, opening her bag and taking out a handkerchief. She said. "Darling, the next time you buy me a present, how about a bottle of perfume? Some of that wonderful, wonderful *Stratosphere*."

I remembered—and shuddered.

"I'll get you a vial of scent, but it won't be that brand. Too many poignant memories." I ran a finger around my throat.

"But you will get me some perfume?" Libby asked, in the soft, persuasive voice. "What kind?"

"The very latest," I promised, squeezing her hand under the table. "What all the debbies go after, *April in Scranton!*"

HOLLYWOOD MURDER

(Concluded from page 61)

fused to go through with it, he murdered her in such a way that he figured it would look like an accident. But, as insurance, he wanted Kapilow blamed, if the crime was discovered. That's why Benedetti told you Mr. Kapilow had a date with Miss Lee and Wumpelmeyer said they had gone aboard the yacht. It was all pretty clumsy, but that's the way they figured it out."

I went over to the bar, and poured myself another drink.

"Sherlock Holmes wouldn't like me," I said. "I had the facts, but didn't add them up right. After this I'll stick to writing about detectives, instead of trying to be one. I owe you a suit of clothes, Jimmy, and an apology to Bernice."

"Thanks," said Jimmy.

"Go to blazes!" said Bernice.



Carter pulled Lila close to him
so that he could cover both
Boyle and Kip

DEATH LIGHTS THE WAY

By RIC HASSE

Insurance sleuth Kip Ransom has a trick or two up his sleeve when he pits himself against a murderous thief!

KIP RANSOM leaned against the "No Loitering" sign fastened to the rusty iron fence around the grounds of the county jail and tucked another cigarette between his lips. The blue haze of evening hung over the streets, but the asphalt was still steaming from the departed sun. There was little traffic. An occasional taxi circled the block to get back to the business and amusement district, and across the street police squad cars pulled into their reserved

parking area beside the dirty, gray stone building that housed the city police department.

The two blue lights on either side of the worn stone steps flickered on, and from the entrance between them flashed a pair of trim, well-rounded ankles. Kip Ransom flipped away his cigarette and angled across the street.

The girl's white taffeta dress gave distinction to her lithe, curvesome figure, and the

hem swung in rhythm with her quick, hurrying steps. A white ribbon held in place red hair that gleamed like restless fire as the street lights fell across it.

Kip swung his lean one hundred and seventy-five pounds alongside the eye-filling redhead and fell into step with her.

"I'm an old friend of your brother's, Miss Malinov," he began by way of introduction.

Lila Malinov pulled up sharply and swung to face him. Full red lips were drawn away from clenched teeth. Her voice was low and filled with cold antagonism.

"You stay away from Curt," she blazed. "He wants nothing to do with you and your kind! Curt has a good honest job and he's strictly on the level now!"

KIP grinned down at her. He had a crooked, deceiving grin that could mean almost anything.

"I'm glad to hear it—if true," he told her. "But I still want you to take a message to him from me."

Anger added a sparkle to her dark eyes as she snapped, "I'll take no messages to Curt. He wants nothing to do with criminals any more!"

"As I said before, that would make me happy, if true. But one of the best jewel artists in the country retiring when he's broke takes quite a lot of believing," Ransom told her. "Anyway, it will do no harm to take the message. Just tell him that Kip Ransom, of Continental Insurance, is staying at the Bradley Hotel, and that Continental's top offer for the Vanisse emeralds is ten grand. Just tell him that; he'll understand."

She put her fists on her hips and tilted her flaming head belligerently.

"Now, you listen to me! Just because my brother was in St. Louis when some emeralds were stolen, is no reason for everyone to start thinking right away that he's the one that stole them! I've just told the police to stop persecuting him, and now I'm telling you! Lay off my brother! He's going straight now!"

"Okay, okay, so he's straight now. But tell him what I said anyway." Kip tipped his red-banded Panama, turned his back to her and started back across the street.

Once on the other side, however, he turned in the same direction in which the girl was hurrying. He kept her in sight all the way to a second-rate hotel on East Ohio Street.

From the bell captain there, Kip dis-

covered that Curt and Lila Malinov were in adjoining rooms; that they were traveling with a sporty dresser named John Jacob Carter; and that the three were representatives for a reputable Eastern book publisher. They were selling the bookstores, contacting local critics and book clubs, and lining up publicity and advertising for their employer's book list.

Kip Ransom slipped the bellhop two dollars and gave instructions that he be called at the Bradley as soon as Lila Malinov and her brother went out.

He walked around Monument Circle on the way to his own hotel. Just beyond the Concert Theatre his eye caught a small novelty and trick shop, and he joined the group examining the window display of magic, cheap jewelry, and practical jokes. Ransom went inside and bought a little bottle of metallic looking paint powder, a camel's-hair brush, and a bottle of lighter fluid.

At his hotel, he stopped at the desk and learned that there were no calls or mail for him. As Kip unlocked the door to his room he reached automatically for the light switch, but the lights were already burning.

THE man stretched out on Kip Ransom's bed was tall and thin, with baggy, tired eyes and hollow cheeks. He looked like a man who worried a lot.

"Been waiting for you," the visitor said around a long black projectile that looked like a cigar and smelled like a garbage incinerator.

Kip tossed his hat on the dresser without taking his eyes from the man.

"How'd you get in here?" he demanded.

The baggy-eyed man took his smoke pot from his mouth and grinned.

"Hotel dick's a friend of mine."

"What do you want?" Kip insisted.

"Got an invitation," the man said in a dry voice, and pulled a yellow Western Union envelope from the inner pocket of his crumpled seersucker coat. "I wanna cooperate," he said, and his tone dripped sarcasm.

Kip pulled the wire from the envelope and read it. It was addressed to the local police chief, and was signed by the Continental Insurance Company. It stated:

"We would appreciate your full cooperation with our investigator, Kip Ransom, in regard to the recovery of the Vanisse emeralds."

Kip made a sour grimace and crossed the

THRILLING DETECTIVE

room to open the windows a little wider.

"Well, thanks a lot for dropping up, chief, but I don't think I'll need your cooperation. No criticism of your department, you understand. I just like to work alone."

The tired looking cop on the bed chuckled.

"I can imagine," he said. "Have to insist, though. Wouldn't want you to lose all that money."

Kip swung around, his eyes suspicious.

"What money?"

The cop chuckled again.

"Fifteen thousand you put in the hotel safe."

"I know," Kip said disgustedly. "The hotel dick's a friend of yours."

The cop swung his feet off the bed and sat up. His chuckles died out.

"Look, Ransom, I was assigned to this job, when we received a wire from St. Louis to pick up Curt Malinov for questioning. I'm going to cooperate with you and Continental Insurance one hundred percent—until you make a deal to buy back those stolen emeralds. Then I lock you up for compounding a felony."

He laid himself back on the bed again with the air of having finished a hard day's work. As an afterthought he said, "Name's Tom Boyle. Lieutenant."

The phone beside the bed rang and Boyle stretched a hand for it. He listened for a minute, then held it out to Kip.

"This Kip Ransom of the Continental Insurance?" an unfamiliar voice asked. "Okay. I understand you're in the market for jewelry. Say, a matched set of emeralds—pendant, brooch, and earrings?" The voice had a hollow, false lisp to it, and Kip knew that whoever was talking was holding a marble or a coin in his mouth, to disguise his voice.

Kip said, "Where can I meet you?"

"Not so fast, not so fast! Your offer was ten thousand. I figure at least twenty. Those emeralds are worth a hundred grand."

Kip glanced at the detective on his bed. Boyle had his eyes closed, but he was still exhaling puffs of foul smelling smoke.

Ransom said, "I can't meet you there. You're too far away. If you can come half of the way, I might be able to see you."

The disguised voice said, "I'll think it over and give you another call."

Kip Ransom hung up the receiver and looked down at Boyle again.

"A friend of mine in Cincinnati," he said

casually. "Wanted me to come over to visit him."

Boyle chuckled softly.

"What was his lowest offer? Twenty-five G's?"

Kip shrugged his shoulders disgustedly.

"Okay, Boyle, I'll play it your way. He said he wanted twenty, but would consider fifteen and let me know. He was hiding his voice."

"Yeah, I noticed it too," Boyle agreed.

Kip lit a cigarette and watched the match burn till it reached his fingers, before he blew it out.

"Did you find out anything from Curt Malinov down at headquarters?"

"Nope. St. Louis is certain he's the guy with the gems." Boyle sounded completely disinterested.

"So am I," Kip said. "Continental has as good a *modus operandi* file as St. Louis. The job was pulled in Malinov's style all right. Are you having him and his sister tailed?"

"Yep."

AGAIN the phone rang. Kip snuffed out his cigarette and reached for it, but Boyle's hand was there first.

"Hello," his dry voice said, after he'd listened a moment. "How you doing, Jimmy?" He handed the phone to Kip Ransom. "Bellhop at the Ohio Hotel."

"I know," Kip told the detective as he took the phone. "He's an old friend of yours."

"Yep. Good boy, Jimmy. Smart."

The bellhop told Kip that Curt Malinov and his sister had just left the hotel and taken a cab to a good downtown restaurant.

"Lock the door when you leave," Kip told Boyle, and picked up his hat. "I suppose you had Malinov's rooms searched?"

Boyle indicated with a grunt that he had. Kip Ransom started out, but paused for a moment in the doorway.

"Where'll I be able to locate you later this evening?"

"Headquarters," Boyle told him.

"Don't your tongue get tired, talking so much?" Kip said, and closed the door.

As he crossed the linoleumed lobby floor of the Ohio Hotel, Kip Ransom saw that the room clerk reading the evening newspaper behind the desk was not the same one who had been on duty earlier. Kip walked up and leaned an elbow on the marble counter.

"Give me the key to room four-o-six,

please," he requested with a forced yawn.

The clerk reached into the bank of slots behind him and tossed a metal tagged key onto the desk.

"No mail?" Kip made his voice sound disappointed.

The night clerk shook his head and Kip took an elevator to the fourth floor. This business of bribing maids, to get into rooms, was foolish. He knew that a hotel desk clerk couldn't remember the faces of all the people who were registered. That's why he himself always carried his key instead of returning it to the desk each time he left the hotel.

Inside Curt Malinov's room, Kip went to work methodically. Malinov's Gladstone bag was open on a little stand beside the bed. Kip took it by the handles and turned it upside down, then kicked the contents around the floor. He jerked the bedclothes off the bed and turned the mattress over. The drawers of the dresser and table were pulled out and the corner of the rug flipped back.

In the bathroom he dropped the towels on the floor and dumped the shaving kit into the bathtub. There was another door to the bathroom, with a key in the lock, but Kip ignored it.

When he was finished, he surveyed the cluttered bedroom carefully, then went to the door connecting with the next room. It was unlocked, so he went in and repeated the process in the girl's room. He paused for a moment to examine a set of blue lingerie, then dumped her clothes on the bed, instead of on the floor. Lila Malinov looked like a nice kid, he thought. No use in getting her clothes all dirty.

Kip Ransom went out through Curt's room and locked the door after him. In the corridor, he took from his pocket the brush and paint powder he had bought. He worked on the door for a moment, then hesitated by the corridor door to the girl's room before going downstairs. Kip tossed the room key onto the hotel desk and walked out without stopping.

DIRECTLY across the street from the hotel entrance was a cheap bar. Kip Ransom went in and ordered a Scotch and soda at the bar; took it to a table near the window, where he had a clear view of the hotel doorway. The Scotch tasted of iodine. Kip asked a waiter to exchange it for cognac, and went to the telephone hanging on the wall near the door.

With one word, Lieutenant Boyle agreed to come right over. Kip hung up the receiver and returned to his table. His cognac tasted like grape juice blended with gasoline. He gave it back to the waiter and ordered beer, specifying that it come in a bottle.

At almost the same moment that Boyle came through the door of the bar, a taxi deposited Curt Malinov and his sister in front of their hotel, along with a little chubby character in a brilliant checked sport coat and a cream French hat with the brim turned up on one side and down on the other. Boyle let his tall, thin frame collapse into the chair opposite Kip Ransom, planted his elbows on the table and his tired, hollow-cheeked face in his hands.

Kip said, "I'm sorry that I haven't got a couch here for you. Do you want a drink?"

The detective shook his head without removing it from his hands.

"Sleep too much any way. Don't drink. Stomach."

Kip said, "Yeah, it's bad on my stomach, too," and called for another beer. "Curt Malinov, his sister, and J. J. Carter just went up to their rooms," he said.

The detective pulled a black cigar from his pocket and set fire to it.

"I know. Saw 'em."

"I'm going up to see them," Kip told him. "I want you to give me a five-minute start, then come up."

"Why?"

"I think Malinov's got the jewels hidden in his room, or in his sister's," Kip explained. "He wouldn't risk hiding them any place else, where he couldn't keep a constant check on them. And if he's got them, I'll find them in five minutes."

Boyle shook his head, causing the foul smoke from his stogie to curl in weird patterns in front of his face.

"You mean you think you can make a deal with him in five minutes," he stated.

"Forget that," Kip said. "You can search me when you come up if you want. And you know that the cash is still in the safe at my hotel."

Boyle thought for a moment, then grunted assent and looked at his watch.

Kip Ransom crossed the street, walked rapidly through the hotel lobby, with his head carefully turned away from the desk clerk, and went up to the fourth floor.

Before he knocked, he took the bottle of lighter fluid from his pocket, washed off the

doorknobs of both rooms. He got no response from Curt's room, so he went to the girl's room and rapped.

LIILA MALINOV came to the door, her face cloudy with anger. She was still dressed for the street and wore long white gloves, to match her sleeveless gown.

"Well," she demanded belligerently.

"I want to see your brother," Kip told her. "I knocked at his door, but he didn't answer."

"He's probably busy cleaning up his room," she snapped and threw the door wide open, so that Kip could see the wild disorder within. "Curt's room is even more of a mess! The police have no right to search our quarters, and I'm going to make a complaint against them in the morning!"

Kip Ransom looked around the room with an expression of amazement on his face.

"I don't blame you," he said. "They certainly tore things up. I hate to bother you, but would you get your brother? If I can see him now, I won't have to trouble him again."

The girl hesitated a moment, then nodded and walked across the littered room to the connecting door. She opened it. Kip saw her stiffen. She leaned against the door jamb for a second, then slumped to the floor, her vivid red hair tossed back from her face in a wild mass.

Kip Ransom sprang across the floor and stared into the next room. It was just as he'd left it earlier, save for the figure of Curt Malinov stretched face down on the floor in the midst of his scattered clothes. The haft of a huge clasp knife protruded from his bloody back. If the blade was as long as the handle, it must have gone almost through his body.

Kip lifted the girl's limp form from the doorway and carried her to her bed. He started for the bathroom for some water, when the door was pushed open and Lieutenant Boyle stepped in.

"Five minutes is up," he said. Then looking around the room and at the girl, he added, "Something go wrong?"

Kip merely pointed to the other room...

Lieutenant Boyle paced up and down the room, his baggy eyes filmed with worry and his black cigar leaving an obnoxious trail behind him. The experts from police headquarters had already finished their work and gone, taking with them the corpse of Curt Malinov and photographs and fingerprints

of everything in his room.

Kip Ransom sat in the one easy chair in the room, quietly smoking a cigarette, his lean face set in thought. Lila Malinov sat on the edge of her brother's bed with her red hair blending with the shoulder of the loud sport coat it rested on. Chubby John Jacob Carter had his arm around the girl, and seemed to be enjoying his role as comforter, for he made soothing sounds and stroked her hair with his free hand.

Boyle ended his pacing in front of the couple.

"Let's do it again," he said. "The three of you came into Miss Malinov's room, found the mess, then you and Curt each went to your own rooms to check up there. Right?"

The round-faced Carter looked up and peered through horn-rimmed spectacles whose lenses made his eyes seem double their actual size.

"That is correct, Lieutenant."

"And you didn't hear any fighting in here?"

"I heard noises, but I didn't know it was fighting," Carter replied. "I thought it was Curt cleaning up. You say the police didn't tear the rooms up, so it must have been burglars. They may have come back."

Boyle muttered, "Yeah," and threw a nasty look in Kip Ransom's direction.

"You two had better go to your rooms," he said, and added in what was intended as a kindly tone, "I suggest that you lie down, Miss, and get some rest." When they had gone he turned to Kip Ransom.

"Give me five minutes and I'll find the jewels! Hah! You carry a knife?" To Kip, Boyle's tone was sarcastic.

Kip wrinkled his nose in a grimace of distaste.

"Don't be silly, Boyle."

"Well," Boyle demanded. "How did you intend finding the stuff?"

Kip stood up and walked to the door.

"What with finding the body and all, I'd forgotten about my scheme. Your cops probably have it all messed up now, anyway."

HE SNAPPED out the light. For a moment nothing could be seen in the room but the end of Kip's cigarette and the bigger red spot of Boyle's cigar. Then a faint yellowish glow appeared under Kip's hand on the light switch.

"I'm the one who messed up the rooms," he explained to the detective. "Then I dusted

the doorknobs with luminous phosphorescent powder. The idea was that Malinov would think there was a search and the first thing he would touch would be the hiding place, to make sure the emeralds were still there. His hands would pick up the powder from the doorknob and leave it on whatever he touched. So now we look for the glow of the luminous powder."

They stood silent in the darkness for a moment, then Boyle snorted.

"There's no glow except on the doorknob and the wall around the lightswitch, where he fumbled for the light."

Kip turned on the light again.

"Well," he defended. "Either your men wiped the powder off taking fingerprints, or the killer came in before Malinov had a chance to check. Unless—"

He turned suddenly to the lightswitch and examined it closely. It was a standard switch, with a black toggle sticking through a chromium wall plate.

"With the light from the hallway," Kip said excitedly, "he wouldn't have fumbled around for the switch; he could have seen it."

He pulled a handful of coins from his pocket, selected a dime and used it to loosen the two screws that held the chromium switch plate to the wall. Behind the plate was fastened a black metal switch box, and in it, in the space beside the switch, was a little wad of tissue paper. He opened the wad carefully, his eyes and Boyle's fastened on it expectantly.

A small bit of sparkling green lay on his palm. It was in the shape of a faceted teardrop, fastened at the small end to a tiny gold clamp. Boyle looked up first.

"Only one," he said in amazement. "Why should he hide only one earring? Where's the rest of the set?"

He took the emerald and slipped it into his pocket. Then he opened the door and said purposefully, "I think I'll have another talk with Lila Malinov. You powdered her door knob, too?"

Kip nodded, and the cop walked down the hall. Kip stayed where he was and lit another cigarette. He didn't believe the girl had anything to do with the jewels, and wasn't too sure now that her brother had. He noticed absently that his finger tips had picked up dirt from the wall switch, and walked over to the bathroom. He switched on the light and closed the door while he washed his hands.

He towed his hands, turned off the light, and started back into the room. He stopped with his hand on the door. The knob of the bathroom door glowed eerily under his hand. He turned around slowly and stared into the blackness of the little room. The bathroom was between two rooms, with a door into each. The knob of the door opposite Malinov's room glowed too.

Kip Ransom flipped on the bathroom light and tried the other door. It was locked, but Kip remembered that when he was here before, the key was on this side of the door. There was no key now.

He knocked on the door. A key turned in the lock on the other side and the door was opened by the pudgy little book representative, J. J. Carter. His bespectacled eyes were questioning.

"I see that you split a bathroom with Mr. Malinov," Kip stated.

"Oh, no," Carter said, and waved his hand at the open door on the other side of his room. "I have my own bath. Most of these bathrooms open into two rooms, I expect."

KIP grunted, and looked around the room. "Would you mind doing me a favor," he asked.

"I'd be delighted to do anything to help in this dreadful occurrence," the little man said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Turn out your lights."

Carter slanted his brows in a puzzled frown, then shrugged his shoulders and walked to the switch beside the door. The room plunged into blackness. A faint glow came from the middle of the room. Kip moved toward it, stumbled into a chair and pushed it aside. His hands reached for the glow and encountered smooth leather.

The lights flashed on again and their sudden brilliance made him blink. Kip saw that he had in his hands a heavy cowhide salesman's case. He looked over his shoulder at Carter, dropped the case, and swung around.

Carter's pudgy little hand held a stubby revolver and its muzzle was pointed at Kip's stomach.

"I'd hate to have to shoot you," he said. "Because that would bring your policeman friend. Turn around and walk to the wall."

Kip started to turn, when the girl came. She came running through the bathroom door, and she was crying.

"John, help me! This cop thinks that I—" Her tear-filled eyes caught sight of the

gun in Carter's hand at the same time that Lieutenant Boyle rushed through the door after her. Carter stepped quickly behind the girl and encircled her body with his free arm, pulling her close to him and pinning her arms to her side. He jerked her back, so his gun would cover Boyle as well as Kip Ransom.

BOYLE stopped dead, his hand half under his coat lapel.

"What is this?"

Kip pointed to the leather case.

"The rest of the Vanisse emeralds are hidden in the case," he said. "Curt Malinov didn't have them after all. But he was, or used to be, a shrewd jewel thief himself, and it didn't take him long after the police questioned him to figure out who did have them."

"Shut up, and get over against the wall, both of you!" Carter snarled at them.

Lila Malinov dropped her head suddenly, her red hair cascading down over the arm that held her. Carter let out a sudden yelp as the girl's teeth sank into his forearm, and he released his hold on her. She whirled, with her head still lowered, and started to butt him in the stomach.

Carter raised his stubby revolver and clipped the girl viciously across the top of her red head. He realized his mistake and tried to line up the muzzle again, but too late, for Boyle was coming at him from one side and Kip Ransom from the other.

The gun wavered uncertainly between the two, then fired harmlessly into the floor as Boyle grabbed his gun arm. Kip's fist

whirled past Boyle's ear and landed flush on the point of the killer's chin. Carter sagged to the floor without a sound, with Boyle still hanging onto his right wrist.

Boyle plucked the revolver from a limp hand and let the arm drop. He looked over at Kip Ransom, on one knee beside the girl.

"Well," he asked.

"Obvious, isn't it?" Kip remarked, looking up. "Malinov found out that Carter had the emeralds and demanded a cut. Or maybe he was going straight like Lila said, and threatened Carter. They had a fight and Carter used the knife. He knew Malinov's room had been searched once already, without anything being found, so he planted the one earring in the wall switch, thinking we'd go over the room more carefully now."

"The door between his room and Curt's bathroom was locked on Curt's side. He had to get into Malinov's room from the corridor. Malinov didn't touch his doorknob; he came in front Lila's room. Carter got the luminous powder on his fingers coming in to plant the earring, and left a trail right to his sample case. If you check the handle of the murder knife in the dark, you'll probably find that it glows."

Kip picked up the girl for the second time that night and started for her room.

"This poor kid keeps getting knocked out," he said. "She needs someone to take care of her."

"Yeah," Boyle agreed. "You take care of her and I'll take care of this one."

He stooped over the inert figure of Carter with a pair of handcuffs.



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"Back away a little," the man ordered

MARC OF THE BEAST

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Lawyer Cross Drake accepts a vineyard proprietor as his client—and gets tangled up in the grapevine of murder!

YOUNG Cross Drake did not like the tone of the interview he had had with the man in his office earlier in the afternoon. But a young lawyer just getting re-established after a three-year layoff in his practise can't afford to pass up clients,

especially when the man puts down a hundred-dollar retainer before he even tells his story.

Now, a few hours later, Drake was driving through the hillside village of Acadia, and on up the Parish Road through acres of vine-

yards planted with *Noir Hatif de Marseille* grapes, spur-trimmed and green-headed like countless contour rows of miniature trees encircling the limestone hillside. Back of him the sandy coastline of the white-dotted bay made a postcard picture as it circled toward Bay City in the distance.

Higher ahead on the hill road, he found the OLD COUNTRY WINERY, to which he was driving, its doors jutting from the limestone cliffs. He turned in through the tall posts of a wrought iron gate. Before him a snow-white oystershell road ribboned between heavy-leaved grape vines. He pulled to a stop before a barndoortlike entrance to the small winery. Off to the side, a small winding stream gave off the slightly sourish smell of the discarded water used to wash vats.

He brought out of his jacket pocket a small colored booklet advertising a complete line of OLD COUNTRY WINES, and examined it. Above an embossed, colored picture of a wine bottle encircled with a crest of vine leaves and fruit, there was printed in small type a quotation:

But still the Vine her ancient Ruby yields.
And still a garden by the Water blows.

—The Rubaiyat

Below the trademark, was the company name:

OLD COUNTRY VINEYARDS
Bruno Fontana, Proprietor

Scribbled in pencil was the memorandum of the appointment his client had given him. It merely said, 5 P. M. 17-D. The seven had a bar through it in European fashion. 17-D was the number of the state road which ran past the winery.

The rest of the circular was a paean to OLD COUNTRY still wines. He stuffed the circular back into his pocket and got out of his car. Soon he was walking through the big doors into a coolish office room off a main corridor running back into the limestone cave.

A smallish man with a bald high-domed forehead stopped sorting stray papers out of an old rolltop desk, and looked at him inquiringly through strong glasses. The man was shabby and tired-looking, and his movements were slow and indifferent. A movie director would have cast him as a faithful clerk.

"I should like to see Mr. Fontana," Drake explained.

The man picked up another slip of paper,

examined it slowly and dropped it into the wastebasket.

"He's not here," he said, without looking up again.

"When will he be in? I have an appointment with him."

"He won't be in," the man answered, picking up another paper.

"That's odd," Drake remarked, hiding his impatience. "He wanted me to meet him here at five o'clock."

The man turned slowly and looked at him with weary tolerance. "He won't be coming back," he said in his slightly squeaky voice. "He's dead."

The information, delivered so indifferently, affected Drake like a slap in the face. With a sharp intensity, he remembered his earlier premonition that there had been something wrong with this whole business.

"Why, I was talking with him at one o'clock."

"He was killed at two," the man said dully, shoving a folded paper into his worn black brief case.

"Killed?"

"Yes. Shot."

Drake fingered his forehead nervously. "I see. That's too bad. Who—"

"I don't know. The police haven't found out. He was killed on the fourth floor of the Gulf Coast Building, shot dead. I was in the car waiting for him. The police don't know who shot him or why."

The man spoke with the tired forbearance cultivated by minor clerks. He turned back and looked at Drake with weak interest.

"Mr. Faudre, his vintner, is back in the storage rooms somewhere, if he'd do."

"Thanks," Drake said. "Where can I find him?"

"Oh, he's the only one back there. Saturday afternoon nobody's here but us. He's probably around the tanks checking temperatures." The man scratched his high bald head and returned to his paper sorting.

Drake carefully opened the small door, stepped through it, and closed it behind him. Then he stopped to look around. He had seen many of these Gulf Coast wineries protruding from hillside caves, but this was the first one he had been in.

He was standing in a long sandstone cave with an irregular ceiling of damp-looking stone. Four rows of upright white oak tanks, each holding perhaps five thousand gallons of wine, lined a passageway dimly lighted by overhead electric lights hung from ex-

posed wires. The tanks were numbered consecutively from 1 up.

Aware of no one's presence, he followed the aisle of tanks around a sharp turn. It was darker back here, and the high round tanks seemed like rows of queer burial vaults. Still not seeing anyone in the eerily silent cave, he stopped to listen.

Then a voice froze him in his tracks. There was a queer quality to the voice, probably due to the strange acoustics of the cave, but there was nothing mystifying about the words Drake heard.

"Stop, mister."

Drake spun around, to face the muzzle of a pistol protruding from between two of the big tanks. Behind the gun, a pair of small black eyes in a bearded face stared at him unblinkingly. Cautiously, the man edged out from between the tanks.

"Back away a little," he ordered.

Drake obeyed, still keeping his hands high.

IN THE better light, he saw that the man was below medium height and build. He wore a heavy Vandyke beard, and one thin shoulder was fully two inches higher than the other. He limped slightly as he came out.

"What do you want?" the man demanded, his voice high-pitched.

"I came to see Mr. Fontana, but the man in the office said to see you. If your name is Faudre, I'm looking for you."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Drake. I'm a lawyer in Bay City. I had an appointment with Mr. Fontana."

"What about?"

"I don't know," Drake answered impatiently. "And put that gun down. I don't like being held up this way."

The man ignored the request.

"When did Fontana make this appointment with you?"

"Look," Drake said, his eyes clouding with mounting irritation. "I don't know what this is all about, but if you'll put that gun down, I'll tell you what I know. About one o'clock a man giving the name of Fontana came to my office and gave me a retainer to represent him in a law case he expected to be coming up. He—"

"What did he look like?" the man asked shrewdly.

"He was a medium-sized, heavy-set man in a tan summer-weight suit and Panama hat, and spoke with a slight accent, probably Italian, perhaps of the middle class."

The Vandyke bobbed and the suspicion in the black eyes ebbed slightly.

"He paid me a retainer and told me he was in a hurry," Drake continued. "We made an appointment to discuss the case here at five o'clock this afternoon. It's five o'clock, I'm here, and now I learn that Mr. Fontana was murdered at two o'clock. That seems to be the end of my business with him. So, if you'll just drop that gun, I'll run on back to town."

The Vandyke seemed partially satisfied, and the gun arm dropped slightly.

"In that case, then," the man said, "I suppose you've brought the key?" His black eyes shone eagerly as he asked the question.

"He didn't give me anything except my retainer."

The gun came up abruptly. "I don't believe it. You'll have to do better than that. Where is the key?" the little man demanded.

Drake's eyes flashed anger. "Listen, man. I've told you that Fontana didn't give me anything except the address of this place, and some money."

"Fontana phoned me just after one o'clock," the black-eyed man said tightly. "He said he had given the key to a lawyer. By your own words, you're the man. I want that key. It won't do you any good, and I might even give you a fair price for it. But you are going to give it to me—I promise you that."

"I'm getting enough of this," Drake snapped. "I've told you he didn't give me a key, and I'm tired of repeating it."

The Vandyked man refused to believe him. "And I'm tired of trying to make you believe I'm going to get that key from you. Mister, I can make you wish you had given it to me."

"I think you killed Fontana for the key," Drake flung out at the man impulsively.

For an instant the black eyes started. "That's ridiculous. I was here handing out paychecks to the men when he was killed."

"Then who did it?"

The man shrugged. "I have no idea. Perhaps you, if you suspected what that key was worth. But if it is necessary, I can make you wish you were dead."

"That's enough of this business," Drake said. "I'm a lawyer, man, not a crook like the bunch of you seem to be. If I had your key, you can be sure I'd give it to you."

The man shook his head, as though Drake were a hopeless case. "All right," he said tiredly. "But when you change your mind, tell me. Now walk back down this aisle toward that door in the rear."

THRILLING DETECTIVE

"You won't find any key on me, no matter what's on your mind."

"If I don't, it's because you've already got rid of it, and I can make you tell where it is. Move on."

Drake surveyed the dark passage and the door opening deeper into the hillside. The sight of it was not reassuring. It was probably soundproof back in those deeper caverns.

"I'm not moving a step," Drake announced, fixing a defiant gaze upon the little man.

The man's expressive eyes gave him away. Drake saw in them the decision to shoot, the preliminary tension.

And Drake sprang. Blocking back that he had once been, he flung his body downward and forward. His shoulders crashed into the man's knees just as the cave echoed with the roar of the gun, and the two men crashed to the floor, arms and legs tangling wildly.

The winemaker was a wiry man and all muscle. It was only after much struggling that Drake managed to jerk the gun from him. Strong fingers were clawing at Drake's eyes as he brought the gun barrel down on the little man's head and watched him slide onto the stone floor, unconscious.

The office door slammed and the bald-headed man came padding back down the aisle. He stopped and looked down wearily at the motionless Faudre.

"What happened?" he asked Drake in his tired voice.

Tensely, Drake gave him a swift account of his difficulties with the vintner. "I didn't like this business from the first," he said in conclusion. "I'm going back to town now, and you can tell this man I'm taking his gun with me. If he wants it, let him come and see me about it."

"I don't think I'll wait to talk to him," the tired man said. "Would you mind driving me to town? I haven't a car of my own."

"All right," agreed Drake reluctantly. "Come on, let's get out of here. I don't like anything about this place."

"I don't blame you, sir," the mousy man said. "They're dangerous crooks. That's why I want to leave them."

THEY went out and got into the car and Drake coasted down the white paved hill toward Bay City. He knew that he was somehow involved in Fontana's murder, and that his brush with Faudre, the winemaker, was connected with it. As an ethical attorney, he felt it his duty to report

the whole affair to the police, and turn over to them his hundred-dollar retainer. He would throw the whole business in the lap of his friend Lieutenant McClure, in charge of Homicide in Bay City. McClure would appreciate the break.

"I don't believe I got your name," he said to the passively quiet man beside him in the coasting car.

"My name is Thistlewaite, and I'm the office manager of the OLD COUNTRY WINERY. I mean I was, but I'm through, now. I can't afford to work for such crooked people. I've a reputation to think of."

"Of course," Drake agreed, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and offering one to the man who sat slumped beside him, his arms hugging his brief case. "Did you know they were crooks all along?"

"No, they weren't crooks until Mr. Fontana came back from the Merchant Marine and brought the jewelry with him," Thistlewaite replied. "It just goes to show how the sight of wealth will bring out the devil of greed in a man. It's the root of all evil, though I must say I've never been tempted by the devil in that fashion."

"You say Fontana stole some jewelry and brought it back?"

"Oh, mercy, no. They were his, but still and all, he was trying to do something he knew was wrong, and the wages of sin came quickly to him."

"But if they were his jewels—"

"You don't understand. It's a fantastic story. Mr. Fontana wanted me to help him dispose of them, but I wouldn't. I suppose I should have reported it. I may even be accused of guilty knowledge or something. That's what I wanted to talk to you about as a lawyer. I'm afraid."

"Tell me, if they were Fontana's jewels, what's wrong in his selling them?"

"They were brought into this country illegally. Mr. Fontana was afraid to report them to the government. He's afraid of the government, you see, because over twenty years ago the Fascist government destroyed his family in Italy and would have killed him, too, except that he escaped to America. He came here and became a citizen, and during the war he joined the Merchant Marine and was the captain of a freighter in the invasion of Italy. You see, he liked America, but he was afraid of governments."

"And the jewels?"

"That's the fantastic part of it. Mr. Fontana's family was wealthy in Italy. When

the Blackshirts began destroying their political enemies, the Fontanas were among the first to hear about it. They divided up their family jewelry, and hid it in one of the olive groves on their estate. Mr. Bruno Fontana hid his, too, in case he was caught escaping. He was a captain in the Italian Navy then. Anyway, he got here with some money, and started this vineyard, and in all those years, his jewelry lay buried near Salerno."

"I see," Drake exclaimed. "And by a curious turn of fate, he found himself back near his old home in Italy, and went and dug up his jewelry."

"Yes. Amazing, isn't it? Well, you can see what Mr. Fontana had got himself into. They were his jewels by moral rights, but he knew what a mess he could get into legally. Were they spoils of war? Did Italy have a claim to them? Did the American government, having conquered Italy, have a claim to them? Should he have turned his own jewelry over to the American commander? He didn't dare turn them loose over there, so he brought them home with him and kept them hidden for a year, while he tried to decide what to do. But he wasn't any better off."

"I see," Drake said as the puzzle spread itself before his legal mind. "If he turned them over to the authorities here for appraisal so that he could pay import duty on them he'd still be faced with the task of proving ownership. This would lead him right back into the international legal entanglement he was trying to avoid."

"Yes," Thistlewaite admitted. "He felt sure that at very best, the jewelry would be tied up in litigation for years. Perhaps he'd never again get possession of it. And he needed money badly, now."

"His vineyards look good," Drake observed.

"But they're not. The leaves are green, but there hasn't been a crop for four years. While he was gone during the war, there was no help, and no insecticides. Blackrot and downy mildew got into the vineyard, and there's been no fruit fit to press since. It takes years to make wine by the natural process. Only half the vats are filled, and then only with four-year old wine, ready to bottle. When that's gone we won't have any more to sell for another five years, even if insecticide keeps down the disease of the grapes this year. Mr. Fontana was broke, and he needed money."

"So he set out to get money on the jewels?"

"Yes. That's when he did wrong. He got in touch with one of those men who buy

stolen things. What do you call them—"

"A fence?"

"Perhaps. I'm not familiar with the criminal vernacular. But this man is reputed to have made a fortune in the black market. Mr. Faudre—he's of N'Orleans background, I think—made the contact with this—er—fence. The man came out and saw the rubies, and made a price on them in my presence. Mr. Fontana was to meet him in Bay City today to collect the first payment. He was afraid of the man, afraid he might be tricked in some way."

"I see the picture now," Drake said, as he stopped the car in front of his office building in the city. "A bunch of crooks, all afraid of each other."

M R. THISTLEWAITE sighed sadly. "Yes. What a tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive. Mr. Fontana did not trust him or Mr. Faudre. He felt that a man who would buy illegal property would be dangerous enough to kill for it and save buying it. So, he hid the rubies somewhere about the premises. Even I do not know where. So, if the buyer killed him instead of giving him the money, the killer wouldn't profit by his crime."

"Apparently nobody else will profit by the jewels either, now that Fontana is dead. Now, they're lost to everybody."

"No, Mr. Fontana thought of that. Besides their worth as jewels, you must realize that these items have been family heirlooms for centuries. They're priceless works of art. Why, one of them is a crucifix designed by Benvenuto Cellini himself when he was a goldsmith. It is set with rubies and is at least a foot high. A piece by Cellini would have much greater value as a work of art than its intrinsic value as a crucifix, if you understand me. Mr. Fontana was a lover of art, and he didn't want those things lost to the world if he were killed. That's why he hid them and gave the key to you. He told me that over the phone, but Faudre must have been listening through an extension."

Drake looked at the man a long moment.

"So that's what that Faudre man's reception was about? I'm supposed to have a key which unlocks a box of jewels?"

"A Pandora's box, I should say," Thistlewaite observed waspishly. "He who rides a tiger has trouble dismounting. Mr. Fontana mounted a tiger, and it killed him. The murderer's bullet blew his brains out."

"You know who the killer is," Drake

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snapped. "You and Faudre can tell your story to the police and they can take care of the rest. Who is he?"

"Who? The killer? Why the very man Mr. Fontana was afraid might kill him, I suppose. The man that wanted the jewels. But I wouldn't dare give his name to the police."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, I'm afraid he would kill me, since I know about the deal. And in the second place, I'd be afraid the police would hold me as somehow guilty for knowing about the jewels and not reporting it. Mr. Drake, I'm not a brave man, I admit. That is why I wanted to talk to you. I thought maybe—"

THEY had taken the elevator up to the seventh floor of drake's building, and now he opened his reception room door. Thistlewaite stopped in mid-sentence when he saw a young woman adjusting the cover of a typewriter.

"Still here, Miss Lucy?" Drake said.

"I stayed to finish those copies of that Appeal coming up Monday morning. Is there anything else?"

"No," Drake answered. "And thanks for getting them ready."

His back to Thistlewaite, Drake caught the secretary's eyes, and narrowed his own. "By the way," he continued, "on your way home, would you mind giving my friend, McClure, a ring? Ask him if he'll drop in on me as soon as he's free."

The girl started to reach for the phone, but caught the look in Drake's eye.

"You don't have to wait," he said. "You can do it on the way home."

The girl left with a bundle of stamped letters under her arm, and Drake led Thistlewaite into his private office.

"Now you were saying you thought maybe—"

The little man sank into the depths of a chair and rested his chin on his brief case, his forehead glistening with perspiration. He was the picture of a frightened little man.

"I thought maybe you could take down everything I've told you and let me sign it, like a deposition. Then you could go and get the jewels and give them to the police, and maybe you could get the police not to do anything to me, in return for my help."

"I don't think the law would be hard on you," Drake said. "After all Fontana was only trying to sell some of his own jewelry.

And since you're trying to help them catch the killer, if the jewelry is found, they would then have a case against the man who killed Fontana."

Thistlewaite smiled knowingly. "The man he was dealing with was named Gifford, Bull Gifford. So, you see, it would do no good to tell the officers that."

Drake was familiar with the history of Gifford, a political fixer who worked in the shadows, was mixed up in every political contracting scandal in this end of the state, and who always came out of it richer and unhurt. He was famous for a retort he had once made to a judge when he had been caught red-handed in a particularly brazen piece of contract thievery.

"I've got a million dollars, Judge, and a million dollars can't violate no law." He was right.

Drake had a clear picture of what he was up against. Everything Thistlewaite said indicated there was much more to this puzzle than Drake had bargained for. The prize was a fortune in jewelry, perhaps a million or more dollars' worth of it. One man was dead, a second had already tried to shoot Drake, under the impression that he had control of the stuff.

Suddenly, Drake's reception room door was flung open, and Faudre, the winemaker came in. And he was pointing a gun directly at Drake.

The lawyer looked up from his desk, conscious of having left Faudre's other gun in his pocket where he could not get at it. Faudre's black Vandyke quivered, and his eyes were menacing behind the gun sights.

"Come in," Drake greeted with a casualness he did not feel. "How'd you happen to locate our party?"

"You gave me your name, didn't you? All I had to do was to look in the classified directory. Mr. Drake, I've come for the key. I'm asking you for the last time."

Drake sighed wearily. "This is getting very monotonous. I've told you Fontana didn't give it to me. But if you want to look around—"

Another man was entering the room—and he also carried a gun. A heavy-set man who wore his impressively tailored suit with bear-like awkwardness. Drake had seen his face many times in the papers. It was Bull Gifford.

"You gentlemen stay just as you are." Gifford's voice was deep bass. "Whiskers, you drop that gun!"

STOIALLY, Drake kept his hands flat on the desk, watching Thistlewaite clutching his brief case in a frenzy of fear and trembling. Faudre had dropped his gun and was backed against the wall, his black eyes shining like those of a trapped ferret.

Gifford, towering over his captives, studied them in turn, his eyes finally settling on Drake.

"Where do you come in on this deal?" Gifford demanded. "I trailed this winemaker here, but I don't know you."

"I was retained by Mr. Fontana, if it's anything to you."

"Anything to me?" Gifford echoed in surprise. "It's twenty thousand dollars to me. You ready to fork over the merchandise?"

"What merchandise?"

"Don't play cute," Gifford clipped. "I want them jewels I paid for."

"You paid Mr. Fontana for them—or did you make a partial payment on them?"

"So it was a partial payment," Gifford conceded. "I'm ready to pay the rest, but friend, I want them in my hands first. Imagine that bird getting himself killed on me without delivering the stuff. It's a dirty trick."

"Well you shouldn't have killed him," Drake suggested mildly. "A dead man can't deliver."

The big man's jaw dropped. "Me kill him?" he repeated. "Are you a fool? I knew he didn't have the stuff on him when I made the payoff. How could I have got the stuff with him dead? I just heard about it when I got out to the winery where I was to meet him."

Drake looked at Thistlewaite. "Was the money on Mr. Fontana when his body was found?"

"I have no idea. You see, I drove him to town and let him off at the Gulf Coast building. Then I went on to the bank to pick up our statements, and then drove on out to the winery. I didn't see Mr. Fontana after I let him out of the car. I didn't even know he'd been killed until the police called the winery. They didn't tell me any details."

"I don't know a thing about him getting killed," Bull Gifford boomed. "All I want is my jewels or my money back. He said they was hid out at the winery. You two guys work there. Maybe you know where they are?"

The beard quivered on Faudre's chin. "We don't know where they are, Mr. Gifford. But Mr. Drake does. Mr. Fontana said that he'd given Mr. Drake the key."

Drake felt things closing in on him. Big

Bull Gifford studied him a long moment, then advanced and stood across the desk from him, his gun still leveled.

"Look," he said. "I know the history of them stones. With Fontana dead, they're due to be tied up a long time. I've got twenty thousand in them rocks, and I don't want to lose it. Either fork over the money, or let me have the crucifix I bought. Once I get my hands on it, let 'em sue me."

"I'm sorry," Drake began, "but—"

"Don't you even start to give me no run-around, or I'll blow your head clean off your—"

A popping sound shattered the big man's threat, and Gifford's gun flew out of his hand and hit the floor. Gifford was groaning with the pain of a mangled hand, as Faudre defensively scooped his own gun up off the floor. A second bullet sent the vintner sprawling to the floor, a reddening stain spreading over his shirt front.

Drake was now covering Gifford with his gun and he looked around to see Thistlewaite in the act of dropping a small automatic back into his briefcase.

"Thanks," Drake said. "That was a close one."

Thistlewaite wiped his face nervously with a handkerchief, and polished his glasses. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Fontana bought me that little gun when I did the banking, but I never dreamed I'd get up enough nerve to use it. But they forced me to, wouldn't you say so, as a lawyer? After all, he was a murderer, wasn't he?"

"I guess so," Drake said, eying the man with a new interest.

For the third time the door opened, and Drake watched his friend Lieutenant McClure come hurrying in. McClure's attention immediately switched to the wounded Faudre lying on the floor, and Bull Gifford sitting in a chair nursing his hand.

"What gives, Drake?"

Swiftly and with terse economy, Drake told McClure his story from start to finish. "It sounds completely insane," he concluded, "but oddly enough I'm inclined to believe most of it. I think the very unlikelihood of the whole business accounts for Mr. Fontana getting killed."

McClure looked at the big man. "So you went too far this time, eh, Bull?"

Drake cut in. "I don't believe he did, Mac. I can't see why he would kill Fontana without getting the jewelry. Faudre undoubtedly would have killed for the jewelry, but I don't

believe Fontana was murdered for that reason at all."

"But this whole mess revolves around the jewelry," McClure protested.

Without warning, Drake reached over and jerked the brief case out of Thistlewaite's hands. He opened it and dumped its contents on his desk. Among the papers, it contained the little automatic, and a sealed envelope addressed to Thistlewaite at Bayou City. He tore the end off the envelope and flipped twenty one-thousand-dollar bills onto the desk.

Bull Gifford sprang up. "Why that's my dough," he roared.

"Yes," Drake said. "Thistlewaite is not a big man. His mind runs in small channels. But he was smart enough to see where he could grab a morsel out of the big pot. When Fontana collected from Gifford, Thistlewaite knew about it. He had brought him to town, and was supposed to be on the way to the bank. I believe he slipped up the stairs in the Gulf Coast building, caught Fontana alone with the money in his pocket after Gifford's payoff, and shot him. Then he went downstairs, and on to the bank and back to the winery.

"He was satisfied that the jewelry angle, when he told about it, would be so spectacular that no great significance would be attached to the missing twenty thousand. In short, his own crime would be lost in the shadow of the bigger one, and Gifford would be blamed for it despite his denials. Thistlewaite practically told me that he had seen the murder committed."

"I did not," Thistlewaite objected.

"In effect you did," Drake said curtly. "You described the way Fontana died. You could hardly have done that if you hadn't had a strong visual impression of it. Later, you claimed to know nothing about the way he died except what the police told you over the phone. Anyway, a test of your gun will answer that one. And maybe you can think up a good answer for having the hot money in an envelope you intended mailing to yourself the first chance you got."

McClure, taking no chances, already had the cuffs on Thistlewaite. "Drake, you've sure saved me a wild goose chase. We've had hints that Fontana had some stuff he was trying to peddle, and if we'd got on that trail, and bucked up against Gifford, Mickey Mouse, here, might have been halfway around the world and completely unsuspected. I only wish Fontana had actually given you

the key like he said he had done."

"I'm glad he didn't," Drake said. "Here's the money Fontana gave me." He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and laid it on his desk. Then as an afterthought, he got the advertising folder out of his coat. "No, here's something else. He wrote his address down for me, and the road. Take it, too."

HIS eyes fastened on the small folder, and he was conscious of something in the depths of his mind trying to make itself heard as he reread the printed line above the trademark.

*But still the vine her ancient Ruby yields.
And still a garden by the water blows.*

And underneath it, the memo of his appointment—5 afternoon 17-D.

"Mac," Drake exclaimed excitedly, "could you get a prow car out to the winery? Say, with a crew from some fire station along the way?"

"Sure. Why?"

"It has just entered my thick head that a key is not necessarily a gadget to open a lock. There are keys to puzzles and ciphers."

"I see."

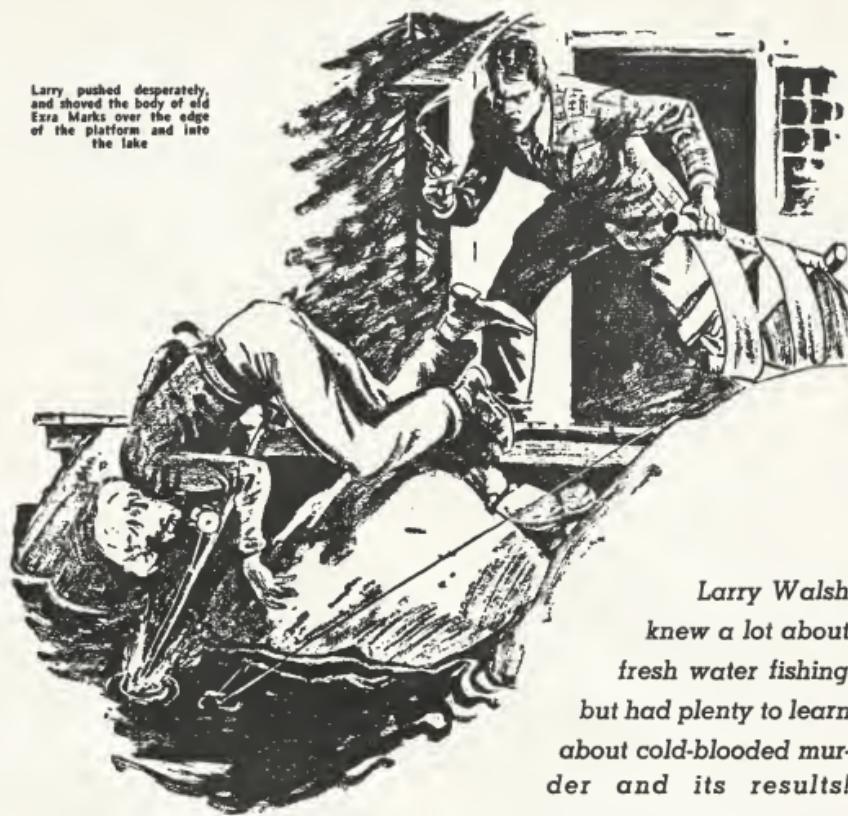
"Look at this. 'The vine' is a poetic symbol frequently used in referring to wine. Take the rest of old Omar's words literally, and this line of verse tells us that wine will yield an ancient ruby. Could that mean that Fontana hid his ruby crucifix in one of his wine tanks? Since the wine stays in the tanks undisturbed except for a racking or two a year, jewels would be pretty safe lying in the slimy mare under five thousand gallons of wine."

"Fontana has lots of tanks. I noticed that there were four rows of them, the first row numbered from one-A up to twenty-A, the second row from one-B on, the next row from one-C, and the last from one-D. Fontana wrote five o'clock, seventeen-D. Seventeen-D is the number of the road that runs by his place, as well as the number on one of his tanks. Of course, I might be wrong—"

McClure was grabbing a phone. "You can't be wrong. This is too good to be untrue. Operator, give me Police Headquarters, quick. But quick!" He turned back to Drake. "Want to go out there with me and watch them drain that tank?"

"What do you think," Drake said. "And while we're at it, I want to find a big empty jug somewhere. This little piece of advertising matter has kind of sold me on OLD COUNTRY WINES. I hate to see it go to waste."

Larry pushed desperately, and shoved the body of old Ezra Marks over the edge of the platform and into the lake



*Larry Walsh
knew a lot about
fresh water fishing
but had plenty to learn
about cold-blooded mur-
der and its results!*

THE BIGGEST FISH

By RAY CUMMINGS

LARRY WALSH quietly opened the bureau drawer, took out the small revolver, and went back to sit on the edge of his bed, waiting. The cottage was silent, now at midnight. Mrs. Green, the housekeeper, and her deaf old husband had gone to bed half an hour ago in their room at the back of the cottage. Larry figured he had waited about long enough—they'd be asleep by now.

Pallid shafts of moonlight were coming in

his front bedroom windows. From here on the second floor, he could see down the declivity, through the lacery of trees, to where the lake was a shining expanse in the moonlight. Old Ezra Marks was down there at the boathouse, fishing.

There wasn't really much chance of a catch, casting out a trolling spoon as the old man was doing. But sometimes, on moonlight nights like tonight, a bass would take the glittering, whirling little lure as Marks reeled

THRILLING DETECTIVE

it in. And Marks suffered from insomnia. He'd had it all summer, so that at midnight he often wanted to tire himself out, casting from the boathouse platform, or sometimes paddling up and down the shoreline in his little canoe.

The bedroom suddenly darkened as the moon went under a cloud. The tense Larry got up from the bed, gazed out the window. Storm clouds were gathering. Marks might decide to come up now, and Larry didn't want that. He had the thing pretty carefully planned. He'd go down to the boathouse, have it out with the old man. And if the worst came to the worst, Larry knew what he had to do.

There was no sound in the silent little cottage as he carefully went down the front stairs, out the living room door, and across the little verandah onto the shadowed path under the trees which led down to the lake. He was fully dressed—his summer sport clothes of white flannel trousers, white shirt, and plaid jacket. The little revolver was in the side pocket of the jacket, sleek and cool in the grip of his hot fingers.

"Oh, hello—that you, Larry?"

"Yes," Larry said. "Caught anything?"

MARKS had heard Larry's step on the boathouse flooring. And in the gloom, Larry could see him now, his thin, frail figure with its mass of gray-white hair that made his head seem over-large.

He was seated in a big canvas chair on the boathouse front platform. It was railless—an open space about ten feet square and a few feet above the lake surface. It gave plenty of room for casting, and as Larry quietly approached from behind, the old man swung his short rod expertly in an arc. The shining trolling spoon flipped out into the air. It fell with a little splash out in the lake, and then Marks was slowly reeling it in, dragging it toward him through the water.

"Not a thing," Marks said disconsolately. "And now, with the moonlight gone, I suppose I might as well quit. I thought you'd gone to bed, Larry."

"I was reading," Larry said. He struggled to keep his voice normal. "Look, I came down to talk about—"

"I did have one strike a while ago," Marks cut in. "A real whopper, Larry. Zing! Out went my line and—"

"And he got away," Larry said. "Okay. I've heard that one before."

There was a little wooden stool beside the old man's big canvas chair. Larry sat down on it. He could feel the revolver bump against his hip with the movement. Marks was slowly reeling in his line, the butt of his rod fastened into a little leather belt socket. Shifty old codger, pretending to be absorbed with his fishing. He knew perfectly well what Larry wanted to talk about.

"Listen," Larry said. "You know what I come down here to see you about, so suppose you stop stalling."

That made the old man turn sharply. He stopped winding his reel. "Stalling?" he said.

Larry's anger rose. "That's what I said." Plain talk now! Why not? The old buzzard wouldn't understand anything else. "You've got my money," Larry said, "and I'm twenty-two now. You've been stalling for a year."

"So you insist on having it out with me now?" Marks asked. His voice was quiet, but there was a snap to it. "That what you mean?"

"That's it," Larry said.

"Fair enough," Marks cut in. "Sure I've been stalling. Why? Because I haven't yet made up my mind to turn that fifty thousand dollars over to you."

"You—the money's mine!" Larry said.

"Not yours—your father's, Larry. He was my best friend, you know that. And when he made me his executor, and your guardian, he knowingly gave me the power to hold up payment of the money as I have."

That fool will! Larry couldn't get his money until this stubborn old man thought it was right and proper to turn it over. Marks could keep control of it until Larry was thirty. But, of course, if Marks were to die before then . . .

"Sure, I know that!" Larry retorted. "But it's my money, and I want ten thousand of it now."

"Why?" Marks interjected. "Are you fool enough to marry that girl—what's her name?—that Vivian Delaney?"

So he knew about Vivian! So he'd been snooping, hiring detectives, had he? Queer, Larry thought, how his own racing heart seemed suddenly to cut off his breath. It was hard to talk. And he was barely conscious that his right hand had gone into the side pocket of his jacket. The thing had to be done, of that he was becoming more certain by the moment. It was the only way.

"You—you doggoned old crook!" Larry heard himself mumble.

"Hard words won't change it, Larry." Marks turned away and began reeling in again as though the subject was closed. "I know all about that girl. If she wants to marry you without your money, tell her to go right ahead with my blessing. But she won't. And what's more, you're going to take a job next fall. That's what your father would have wanted, and so that's what I'm advising you to do."

"Why you miserable old reprobate!" Larry growled.

"As long as I'm alive, Larry—or until you're thirty—I'm going to do what your father would have done," Marks said quietly. "I'm going to try to make a man of you."

AS LONG as he was alive! What a laugh! Larry's fingers closed over the handle of the little revolver. The right side of Marks' head was toward him, the way Larry wanted it. A shot at close range, into the right temple. Make sure of it, he told himself calmly.

"So let's drop it for now," Marks was saying. He had finished reeling in. "Let's go to bed, Larry."

Marks didn't see the revolver as it came from Larry's pocket. The old man was lifting his little rod to jerk the trolling spoon from the water. It came swinging up, shining in the moonlight, and swung under the chair. Then it caught down underneath the canvas of the chair's leg-rest. Marks was jerking to try and free it, so that he didn't see the gun muzzle that was thrust almost against his head.

Now! Let him have it! The blamed old crook! The revolver spat with a little yellow-red burst of flame and smoke. The shot was a sharp crack that echoed away over the lake. And in that second Larry had shoved himself back, crouching on the stool, panting, with the hot, smoking little gun in his hand.

No need for a second shot. For an instant the old man had seemed convulsively trying to rise from his chair. Then the body had jerked forward, slumped sidewise. It would have fallen against Larry had he not desperately shoved it so that it tumbled forward, over the edge of the platform and into the dark waters of the lake.

The thing was done! Exactly right! For another moment Larry sat panting, gathering his wits. With a sweep of his arm he tossed the revolver as far as he could into the water.

Hurry now! That shot would wake up Mrs. Green.

The little green canvas canoe which Marks often used was lying here on the boathouse incline. Larry jumped and slid it into the water, giving it a hard shove. A mountain brook came down the declivity and emptied into the lake just beyond the boathouse. The current it created would carry the body quite a way out, and carry the drifting canoe out also. Larry had thought of all that.

The whole operation had only taken a few seconds. He was back on the platform when from up beyond the trees he heard an excited voice calling.

"Mr. Marks! Mr. Marks! Are you down there? What happened?"

The Greens had been awakened by the shot, even more quickly than Larry had thought. Mrs. Green was shouting now. They had come to one of the lower windows, both of them calling out. Then they saw Larry on the boathouse platform.

"Mr. Larry! Mr. Larry, what happened?"

"Here I am!" Larry shouted. He waved so that they would see clearly where he was, on the platform by the chair. He waved wildly at them. "Mr. Marks he—out there in the canoe! He—he shot himself! I saw it!" he shouted.

"Oh, Mr. Larry! How awful!"

"Shot himself and fell into the water!" Larry amplified. "Phone the sheriff!"

Then Larry turned and dashed up to the house, where on the verandah steps the old couple in their night clothes stood confused and terrified.

"Oh, Mr. Larry!"

"It was terrible!" Larry said. "I was sitting there and I saw him stand up in the canoe, then saw him pull the gun, but there was no time to stop him! He just let out a little despairing cry, and then he did it! Wait! I'll phone the sheriff right away."

It was so easy to act hysterical, shocked, dazed by the terrible thing he had just seen out there on the silent, dark lake.

Sheriff Conley lived just down the road. Larry babbled his story out to him over the telephone.

"I was waiting for him at the boathouse, Sheriff. He'd gone out in the canoe—often does it, you know, because of his insomnia. Then he suddenly appeared, paddling not very far out from shore—"

"Good heavens, Larry, you say he shot himself?" the sheriff gasped.

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"Yes. He stood up in the canoe and pulled the gun. Shot himself in the side of the head, I guess. You better come, Sheriff. The body's still out there in the lake. Maybe I should have taken the rowboat and gone right out. I don't know. I didn't think. I just ran up to phone you."

Larry did it very well. Why not? It was a simple enough thing to do for fifty thousand dollars, he thought.

Then in just a few minutes the sheriff came, with one of his neighbors down the road. The excited Larry dashed with them down to the boathouse.

"The body's floatin'. I can see it out there," the sheriff's neighbor said.

"I'll get the rowboat," Larry said.

THE night was even darker now. The storm clouds were hanging sullen, close overhead, so that there was no moon nor stars. The quiet lake surface was a grey-black expanse. The little canoe was visible, floating lightly out there. And twenty feet or so from it, there was a blob, dark and formless, just at the surface. The little brook current had carried them both a hundred feet or so out from the shore.

Larry sat in the middle of the rowboat, with Sheriff Conley and his friend in the stern.

"He'd been gone maybe fifteen minutes," Larry was saying. "He paddled south along the shore. I couldn't see him after about a minute, on account of the trees. Then he came back—"

"Funny thing, old man like him paddling at night," the neighbor commented.

"His insomnia," Larry said. "Trying to tire himself out. Must be a terrible thing to have, insomnia. It was so bad he even sent for Dr. James this afternoon. That's what worried me. I heard him say to Dr. James, 'Why, not having sleep could drive you crazy, Doctor.' It could, couldn't it? Make a man desperate as that, I mean?"

Dr. James would verify that Marks had said something of the kind. The doctor might claim that Marks was jocular, just lugubrious—but who could be certain about a thing like that?

"Judas priest!" the sheriff said. "And Marks was planning suicide all the while, likely!"

"I suppose so," Larry agreed. "He said nothing to me, of course. But somehow it did seem he was acting queer tonight. Anyway,

I was sort of worried, sitting there on the boathouse platform waiting for him to come back."

"Easy!" the sheriff said suddenly. "Back around! Here's the canoe. Queer it didn't turn over when he fell out of it."

Larry had thought of that. "He was standing up in it when he pulled the gun, Sheriff. I guess I shouted at him, I don't know, it all happened so quick. Then I saw and heard the shot, and saw him tumble forward into the water. His body didn't hit the gunwale; it went head first."

Skillfully Larry had turned the rowboat, backing the stern up to the canoe. "Maybe the gun dropped into it," the sheriff was saying.

"Don't think so," Larry said. "Seems like it fell into the water with the body."

Naturally they wouldn't find the gun. Then suddenly Larry's heart leaped and seemed to stick in his throat. In the dark stern of the rowboat, Conley had muttered something to the man beside him.

"What—what is it?" Larry said.

"Queer," the sheriff said, and abruptly his voice had a grim sound to it.

"Queer, Sheriff?"

"There's no paddle here," Conley said. "Doesn't seem to be around here in the water, either. Ought to be around here somewhere."

No paddle! With a horrified leap of memory, Larry recalled how hurriedly he had shoved out the canoe, with no thought at all of the paddle which was always kept on a little rack in the boathouse. Think fast now! Say something!

"Why—why, that's so, Sheriff," Larry heard himself stammering. "We've got a white pine paddle in the boathouse—guess it's there now. But he had another one, a heavier one that was stained with a dark color. I didn't notice, but I guess that's the one he was using. It ought to be floating around here somewhere, but everything's so dark."

Larry's wits came back. After all, nobody could prove anything by what paddle was used, or where it went.

"Easy now, back a little further," Conley said. "Here's the body. We'll tow it in."

Larry could dimly see the gruesome, submerged thing, close up to the stern of the rowboat now, with the men reaching to grip it.

"Didn't sink," the neighbor said, "because

it was dead when it hit the water. Air still in it means he didn't breathe in any water."

"Back up a little further," the sheriff directed. "Okay, I got it now."

"Shall I head in, Sheriff?" Larry said.

"Yes. Take it slow. We'll tow it."

SHERIFF CONLEY was holding his flashlight over the stern. Larry heard him say something to his companion about the wound in the right temple, made at close range, because there were powder burns. Exactly a suicide wound, self-inflicted. Larry had known they couldn't miss that, yet he felt a new surge of confidence now that they had discovered it.

But the sheriff suddenly had more to say. "Queer!" he exclaimed. "He was shot in the back of the head! How could a man commit suicide by shooting himself around in the back of his head?"

The world suddenly seemed tumbling around the terrified Larry. And he remembered now how Marks had bent down to unfasten his trolling spoon which had caught! And the shot must have hit him in the back of the head!

"It was murder!" Conley said grimly. "And at close range, too!"

Mute with horror, Larry sat rowing. The thing was like a net, closing on him.

"Well, I'll be dad-blasted!" the sheriff suddenly muttered. Then he was whispering excitedly to the man beside him—both of them whispering and leaning back over the rowboat's stern. Then Conley was leaning down, his hands in the water.

"Well, what do you know! He's got a rod and reel here, fastened to him!"

Marks' little rod and reel! Larry's mind swept back. Just before he was shot, Marks had been clutching his rod, and he had the butt of it fastened into a little leather socket at his belt. The belt and socket were left over from Marks' days of tarpon fishing off the Florida coast, but he always used that socket, even here fishing for bass. And when the body had fallen into the lake, the rod and reel had gone with it!

Larry tried to keep his wits. What of it? This couldn't possibly connect him with the murder. Keep cool, he told himself. They've got nothing on you.

But now the sheriff had unfastened the rod and was standing up in the rowboat. He held the rod, began reeling in.

"Well," Larry mumbled, "that is odd, Sheriff."

"Wonder if he had anything hooked," Conley said grimly.

As Conley reeled in, at once the line tightened and came up from the water. A little, dripping, green trail . . .

Conley's laugh was short, ironic. "Leads right up there to the boathouse platform! You were there, Larry, when the shot was fired! That's what you've told us—and Mr. and Mrs. Green saw you there!"

"That's—that's right!" Larry gasped. Say something! Explain it somehow! "I—I was there, but he was in the canoe as I said. I remember now—he stood up with his fishing rod, and cast toward me. The trolling spoon landed on the platform and caught there on the chair."

"Sure!" Conley said caustically. "He stood up in the canoe, cast ashore, and then somebody shot him at close range!" The rowboat had reached the platform now. Conley leaped out.

He bent down with his flashlight.

"The biggest fish is the one who gets away—but you won't get away, Larry. Even that wild talk of Marks' casting from the canoe and hooking the chair up here on the platform is an impossibility. In a cast, the lure goes up and out and down, in an arc. It has to be *on top* of where it lands. Not *underneath*! Marks was up here with his rod when you shot him. We've got you, no argument on that. Take a look."

No connection with the murder? But here it was! The sheriff was holding his flashlight on the big canvas chair. How well Larry remembered it now. Numbly he stared at the little shining trolling spoon where it was caught on the underneath side of the canvas of the chair's leg-rest.

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HOMECOMING

By CARL G. HODGES

Boss Bazzoni's hoodlums and killers get a taste of real tough stuff when Chip Wright, medal man, comes back from Iwo Jima!

CHIP WRIGHT thought, I got bitterness in my heart and hate in my brain. I was taught to kill, and I killed Japs to keep them from killing me. Now I'm back home and nobody gives a hang. Nobody waiting at the bus. Two years was too long for even

Anne to wait. Not even a letter for two months. And Dad's dead. All my brain's got room for is to kill the rat that murdered him.

The depth of Chip Wright's anger was mirrored in the tight, tense muscles of his atabrine features, features as



A gun roared as the edge of Chip's hand struck Jarvis on the side of the neck.

craggy and wire-drawn as the nail-hard sinews under his unfamiliar tweed suit. He tailed the figure of the lantern-jawed man off the bus and into the depot. He lugged his bulging duffel bag in one hand and a brown paper wrapped pair of officer's oxfords in the other.

Inside the door he put his bag on the floor and stood quietly as his bitter eyes scanned the noisy, chattering crowd in the old familiar room. He saw the lantern-jawed man come back from the stand with a pack of cigarettes and stand by the door. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke out of his bulbous nose.

He took a tennis ball out of his coat pocket with his left hand and stood there, squeezing it. Chip noted that two fingers were missing from the man's left hand, the third finger and the little finger. The man caught Chip's eyes on him and he smiled as if the effort hurt his face.

"The doc said it'd help my grip." He dropped the ball back in his pocket.

Chip looked away without answering.

A bobby-soxed girl with plenty of curves and too much lip stick on her full lips said, "Three lemons! You're spoiling my luck, handsome. Move that laundry bag, will ya?"

Chip's eyes traveled coldly over the bulges in the turtleneck sweater and noted the frank look in her eyes. He then glanced at the slot machine she was plying with nickels. He said nothing, but slid his duffel bag out of the way behind him with his foot. He felt the drag of air as the lantern-jawed man disappeared outside.

The girl smiled at him with too frank eyes that calculated quickly the atabrine cast of his features and the ruptured duck in his lapel and got the sum of potential separation pay. Her meaning and her smile were inviting.

"Footloose, handsome?"

It made him a little sick at the stomach. Guido Bazzoni hadn't wasted any time, now that Hal Wright was dead. Slot machines in the bus depot was evidence that the town had busted wide open in sixty days. Chip knew that slot machines, bookie joints, and gambling dives were already pouring riches into Bazzoni's reeking hands. In his heart, Chip Wright was certain that in

some way, somehow, Guido "Pick" Bazzoni had plotted his father's murder.

THE girl was persistent. "Don't be bashful. Let's go, handsome." "Beat it, jail bait!" Chip said.

He turned slightly and bent down for his duffel bag. It was gone. He swung the door open and looked outside. The bag was not there, and then he remembered the lantern-jawed man. Raw anger pushed through him.

The clothes didn't amount to anything but the chest confetti had been dearly won, especially the one that had been hung around his neck on a cord. And that Jap Nambu was a honey. It fired eight shots fast and it hit hard. He'd been saving it to use on his father's killer.

The girl was still there. "Lose something? Let's look some place else. Maybe we can find it."

"Beat it, or I'll call the cops," Chip said.

"Are you kidding?" Her full lips pursed in a raucous razzberry as she pointed across the room. "There's Mister Big himself. Make your beef to him. See what it gets you." She walked away, her hips swinging insolently.

He moved across the dirty floor, threading his way through the milling crowd, using the paper wrapped oxfords he carried as a kind of divider. Above a doorway in the east wall was a neon sign, SHOE REPAIRING. Beside it, along the wall, was a metal shoe-shiner's chair, and in the chair was three hundred and fifty pounds of blue-uniformed beef. A kinky-haired Negro boy was snapping his rag rhythmically over the police chief's size thirteen shoes.

Chief of Police Frank "Deacon" Bond watched Chip approach. His blue uniform was faultlessly creased, his gold badge sparkled on his enormous chest and his jowls were beardless pink. A beatific smile focused around his mild pop eyes and his unctuous voice flowed out of him in the manner that had earned his nickname.

"Lo, the one that was lost is back in the fold." His fat features showed a gentle reproach. "You should of let us know. We'd of had a band and a red carpet. Homecoming for a hero."

"Forget it, Fatso. Some two-bit crook stole my duffel bag. I want it back." Bond was smooth. "I'll tell the boys. What was in it?"

"Clothes and confetti—and a gun."

"Confetti? Oh, yes. Let's see. Congressional Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross, a Silver Star and a Purple Heart."

Chip's jaw was tight. "The war's over, Fatso. Medals are out. I got a new job."

"That needs a gun?"

"Yeah. But I'm not going back to my old job on the Highway Patrol. I'm gunning for a killer."

Bond's smile had a twist to it, but his voice was still smooth. "Killer?"

"Yeah. The rat that murdered Dad."

Bond's fat face was calm. His voice was soft, almost confidential. "Wright, you always were a hot-headed, dumb fool. You're a lot like Hal. I ought to know. I worked under him." He smiled. "Take it easy," he said. "You're more apt to get what you go after. That's the way I do."

He spread his plump arms wide. "Bazzoni's gone nuts. It looks like he's got the town by the tail. It always is tough when new officers take over. One of these days we'll clamp down on him. When we get a D.A. with courage."

"You got one. Gregory's as tough as they come."

"We'll throw the book at Bazzoni when the time comes."

"Including murder?"

"Your father wasn't murdered. Get that out of your brain." He blinked his pop eyes. "It was an accident."

"Accident, bosh! I got some clippings in my mail. Pick Bazzoni's hoodlum brother lams out of stir. He comes here to hideout with Pick. Dad recognizes the cockroach and they have a running gun fight. The next day they find young Bazzoni in a ditch with Dad's bullets in him."

"You're right so far," Bond said. "The next night your dad walked off the side porch at the Empire. Fell on the iron fence. Spikes went right through his stomach."

"That ain't the way I figure it. Dad was already dead when he hit the spikes.

They found something else in his stomach." The moment he said it, he knew he'd blundered, by the cagey look in Bond's pop eyes.

BOND shifted his fat bulk. "Things two months gone are water over the dam. Shucks," he said, "Hal was my friend, too."

Chip turned away. "You haven't got a friend, unless it's a bank book." His voice was cold and bitter. "I'm gunning the rat that murdered him."

Chip moved to the door that said, SHOE REPAIRING. He walked into the shop and put his paper wrapped oxfords on the counter. He spoke to the dark visaged man busy at a machine.

"Give me a pair of tan shoe laces. Twenty-seven inch."

A door in the rear wall opened and a pasty-faced man in shirt sleeves and a green eye shade came into the shop. He looked at Chip with fishy eyes and then glanced meaningfully at the repair man.

"Rubber heels" he said, with his pale lips and put a paper wrapped pair of shoes on the counter. Then he went back into the rear room and Chip caught the swirl of smoke and the rattle of poker chips before the door closed.

Chip thought, This has got all the earmarks of a pay-off.

He didn't waste time. He ignored his own package and swept the other package of shoes off the counter while the dark man was fumbling in a display cabinet for the laces. The man laid the laces on the counter.

"Two bits," he said.

Chip paid him and walked out into the depot waiting room. Bond had vanished. Chip slipped a dime in the slot of a storage locker, slid the bundle inside, closed the door and pocketed the key. Then he ran to the street door.

"Hold it, wise guy!" a raucous voice yelled after him.

Chip whirled. The lantern-jawed man had reappeared from nowhere and he was running for Chip like a halfback going berserk in a broken field. Lantern Jaw had a gun in his hand. He used it. The flying slug crashed the door glass and sprinkled splinters at Chip's feet.

Chip leaped out of the door and across the sidewalk to a waiting cab. He

jumped in. "Two-twenty East Pine. Make it snappy!"

The cab leaped away. Chip looked out the back window as the cab slammed around the corner, its headlights scaring pedestrians out of the way. Lantern Jaw was standing on the sidewalk waving down another cab with frantic waves of his gun.

"Five bucks extra, mister, or he catches us without half trying," the cab driver said. "I ain't crossin' up Fingers Jarvis for regular fare."

"Five bucks it is," said Chip. "Who's Fingers Jarvis?"

"Pick Bazzoni's right-hand bower. And Pick's got the town by the tail, ever since the old police chief, Hal Wright, died. Bazzoni took the lid off."

"Hal Wright was my dad," Chip said.

"Huh?" The cab nearly crashed into the curb as it turned into Pine. "You Chip Wright? The Chip Wright? The one got the Medal of Honor for tossin' them gasoline dough-balls into them Nip caves on Oki? Dugan told me all about it. He might be a little cracked since he got back but he had all the details on that." He twisted around in the seat. "Forget about the five bucks. This is on me." He stuck a dirty paw backward. "My name's McCree. Put her there. Dugan said you was headin' home?"

"How'd Balmy Dugan know it? Only one man knew I was coming home, the guy I'm going to see. Travis Fletcher."

The thought nicked his brain that "Fingers" Jarvis and Deacon Bond had been expecting him at the bus depot. He remembered now that the lantern-jawed Jarvis had boarded the bus ten miles out. He was positive now that Jarvis had stolen his bag. Why?

And then he got a new shock, a shock that made his brain reel. "If you're lookin' fer Fletcher," the driver said, "you won't find him at that address. He's gone nuttier than a fruit cake. He's at the Rest Haven. Been there for a month. Fingers Jarvis was appointed acting coroner in his place till they can have another election."

"Fletch crazy? You're crazy."

"No kiddin'. Deacon Bond had him put in this private sanitorium, run by Deac's brother. Deac's payin' the bill

himself. Pretty nice of Deac."

"Yeah." Chip's voice was edgy. "Take me to Rest Haven. Pronto."

"It's ten bells," McCree said. "They won't let you in."

"They'll let me in, or I'll tear the joint apart."

REST HAVEN was a rambling white house on the outskirts. It had about twenty rooms and forty windows, only a few of which were lighted. Chip could see the pattern of steel bars across each glass. While McCree kept the engine running, Chip walked up the stone steps to the plate glass door. It was protected with steel bars, too. He rattled the door and hammered on the oaken frame. A huge man in a white uniform left a desk at the far end of a white corridor and came toward the door, his tremendous bulk shadowy in the dim light.

He opened the door on a check chain and peered out at Chip with blue pop eyes. "You could double for Deac Bond," Chip said.

"I'm Charley Bond. But that won't let you in here after hours. Beat it."

Chip spat, "Not till I see Travis Fletcher, big boy."

Bond closed the door enough to slip the check chain out of its slot. Then his huge paw pushed the door open. Chip stuck his foot in the opening. "Don't git too big for your breeches," Bond said.

Chip said, "Out of the way, Grease Butt! I'm coming in!"

Bond's huge fist moved like a sledge. It traveled only six inches, but it traveled fast. Chip ducked away. But not fast enough. The doubled fist crashed into his jaw and spilled him back on the steps like a hammered steer. His brain buzzed with the jar of the blow. He tried to regain his balance but his foot slipped on the top step and he crashed backward. He curled his arms under his head and lay still on the concrete walk.

Bond pushed the door open and came through. He came down the steps and stood by Chip's body. His words slammed out at McCree in the cab.

"Better haul your boy friend home before I cave his skull in." He drew back his leg and his pointed shoe started for Chip's head.

Chip quit playing possum. His hands

flashed out. Judo was old stuff with him. He gripped Bond's foot and twisted the shoe viciously. Bond squealed with pain and thrashed around. The savage twist turned his huge frame with his back to Chip.

Chip was on his feet now, his breath sucking noisily. He drove his right foot forward. The vicious kick landed at the bend of Bond's right knee. The big man stumbled and staggered forward like a halfback clipped from behind. Chip kicked again. His foot slammed into the side of Bond's right knee. The big man howled and grabbed for Chip in a twisting turn, his booming voice quavering.

Chip's left hand hooked into the big man's stomach and sank almost to the wrist with the fury of the blow. Bond went "*Ooomph!*" like a busted balloon. He doubled over, his hands holding his middle. Chip's right hand came up and landed flush on the point of the big man's jaw. His target staggered, eyes glazing. Chip hit him again, with cold calculation. Bond went around on rubbery legs and fell like a sack of sand. He didn't move. His huge carcass made a mound of quiet beef on the walk.

McCree came out of the cab, a tire iron in his hands. "You pack a mean wallop. But you'll wind up in the clink. This guy's Chief Bond's brother."

CHIP grinned but there wasn't any humor in him. "Keep your eyes on him. I'm going in to talk to Fletch."

"What if he wakes up?" McCree said.

"That tire iron ought to make things even." Chip leaped up the steps and ran through the door and down to the end of the hall. A guy in a white uniform came out of a door, a dumb look on his face, which Chip recognized at once. A black button was in his ear and a thin wire ran down his neck inside his white jacket.

"Lieutenant!" he stammered. "W-w-w-hen did you git back. I ain't seen you s-s-since Okinawa."

Chip was sympathetic toward neurosis. "Tonight, Balmy. Where's Travis Fletcher's room?"

Fear glazed the man's eyes. "Bond won't l-l-like it."

"Bond's outside by the cab. Where's Fletcher? Make it snappy! That's an

order!"

Balmy Dugan thought he was still in the army. He saluted, dumbly led the way down a side corridor and put a key in a locked door, his hands shaking. Chip walked in and flipped a light switch and the room came alive.

A skinny man, fully dressed, lay on the bed, his eyes shining feverishly. His face was gaunt and creased with lines of pain and hunger.

Chip stared at him, unbelieving. "What the devil, Fletch? You've lost fifty pounds."

Travis Fletcher got to his feet and staggered across the room, his hands making senseless gestures, his eyes staring in his bony face. His voice cackled.

"They say I'm crazy. But I ain't crazy. I ain't crazy. I ain't crazy." He repeated the words over and over.

"You're not crazy, Fletch. I'm taking you out of here. Put on your hat and coat."

Fletcher ran across to the closet, his hands clutching for the door before he reached it. He slapped a hat on his head and squirmed into a coat with pitiful frenzy. And then the words came:

"They said I was crazy. They put me here. They starved me. They beat me. They wanted me to die."

"Who's they?"

Bazzoni. And Deacon Bond helped them. Because I told them that Hal Wright was murdered."

"Save the rest of it, Fletch." Chip took the little man by the arm and led him from the room. He took him outside. McCree was sitting comically on top of Bond's prone body.

"He woke up. I had to tap him. He went to sleep again."

Chip put Fletcher in the back seat of the cab and McCree got behind the wheel. "I s'pose you know you're sitting on a heap of dynamite, with Bazzoni and Bond and Jarvis all on your tail. Where to?"

"The Empire," said Chip. "That's as good a place as any."

McCree's eyes bugged out. "You are looney!"

Chip growled. "This is my headache. Make it the Empire."

"I don't think you know what you're doin', but you're the boss," McCree said.

Fletcher started to recite. "I ain't crazy. I ain't crazy."

"Okay, you're not crazy," Chip said. "I believe you. And I believed you when you sent me those newspaper clippings and when you wrote me that you found a slug in Dad's abdomen. Go on from there."

FLETCHER'S voice started high-pitched and whining but it gained power as he talked. "Two months ago Slats Bazzoni lammed out of the pen. He came here to hide out with Pick. Hal run on to him and tried to put the cuffs on him and send him back. Slats started shooting and they had quite a fight. Ended up in a chase down the main drag in cars. The next day they found Slats in a ditch with your father's slugs in him."

"Go on," Chip said.

"The next morning after that a milkman found your dad's body stuck on the iron fence that runs alongside the Empire. Spikes had gone clear through him. The railing on the side porch upstairs was ripped away and it looked like Hal had busted through it and had fallen on the fence. But there wasn't hardly any blood."

Chip's eyes flared bitterness. "He was dead before he hit the fence? How about the inquest?"

"I found a bullet in Hal's body. He was shot and then his body was thrown on the fence to make it look like an accident. It was murder, and I told Bond so."

His voice started to cracking again. "They carted me off to Rest Haven so quick it made my head swim. They shenaniganed Fingers Jarvis into being acting coroner till they could hold a special election and they returned a verdict of accidental death."

"How come they let you live, instead of killing you?"

Fletcher grinned pitifully. "They knew I had the slug I took out of Hal, but they couldn't find it and they couldn't sweat the information as to where I'd put it out of me. They thought I'd mailed it to you. Even if they killed me, the slug was still left."

Chip thought, No wonder Jarvis was

so anxious to tail me and steal my duffel bag the minute he had the chance. Looking for that slug.

He glanced searchingly at the ex-coroner. "Where is the slug?"

Fletcher raised his right arm and held his left hand under the armpit. "In a glass capsule under the skin on the underside of my arm. I learned the trick from the Nazis. It's a thirty-eight slug. Never hit nothing solid. Ballistics could trace it."

The cab pulled up in front of the Empire Hotel. "I still think you're nuts for coming here," McCree said.

Chip took the key to the bus depot storage locker out of his pocket and gave it to McCree.

"Bring back what you find in this locker. And on your way back here, stop and pick up J. F. Gregory, the D.A. I'll phone him so he'll be waiting for you."

"The D.A.? It's eleven bells. He's probably in the hay."

"We'll get him out of the hay."

Chip crossed the lobby of the Empire and registered at the desk. He led Fletcher to the elevator and they rode up to the third floor and entered Room 308.

Fletcher said, "Bond will find us here. We came to the wrong place."

"I'm more interested in having the D.A. find us." He looked around the room at the rickety bed, the dirty carpet, the faded drapes. "What a dump. Not even a phone. I'll go down to the lobby and phone Gregory so he'll be ready when McCree calls for him."

Fletcher's eyes were scared. "Don't leave me alone."

"I'll lock the door after me with the key."

Chip went downstairs and spent five minutes in a phone booth, talking to D. A. Gregory. He finished: "A cab driver named McCree will pick you up in five minutes. He'll bring you to the Empire. We're in Room Three-O-Eight. I've got enough on Bond and Bazzoni to put them away for good."

He left the booth and started across the lobby to the elevator.

"Chip!"

Anne Carey was facing him. Her legs like a nylon ad, her face, alive and piquant, cuter than a movie poster. His

face went soft for the first time since he'd got off the bus. He had his heart in his eyes as he looked at her. Then he noticed she now had hair, and he remembered, and words were sharp and cold.

"Did you have writer's cramp? Not a letter in the last two months."

"Chip," she said, "I can explain, if you'll let me."

His lips framed his words, hard and unyielding. "You've changed just like everything else in this burg. You used to have red hair, but now you're a blonde and you're painted like an Apache."

HER EYES showed hurt, as if she felt that he should understand. "Bazzoni likes blondes, Chip."

"What the devil? Bazzoni likes blondes. So what?"

"I work for him. I work here."

An alarm clock gonged in his brain. "Bazzoni owns this dump now?"

"Yes. He's owned it for more than a year but he never let it be known until after your dad died. Immediately he came right out in the open with his gambling and everything."

"Huh!" he said. "I was sap enough to bring Fletcher right into their camp."

Her eyes got big. "Fletcher here? Chip, you're a fool."

He was already running for the elevator. Her high heels clicked after him on the tile. They slammed into the car. They got out on three and ran down the hall to Room 308. He tried the door and it was still locked and he heaved a sigh of relief.

He put his key in the lock and opened the door. They moved into the room.

Anne screamed. A scream that chilled his heart. Blood drained out of her face and her legs wobbled under her as she pointed to the body.

Chip saw the quiet form on the floor at the foot of the cheap, rickety wooden bed. Travis Fletcher's sightless eyes stared up at the ceiling. His coat was open and a red blotch of blood marred the left side of his shirt.

Crossing over, Chip knelt down. He lifted Fletcher's limp wrist. He had seen death too often not to recognize it now. "He's dead. Bullet in his heart. My

prize witness is gone."

He got to his feet and stared at Anne. "He didn't kill himself, there's no gun, and the door was locked. I locked it and I had the key."

"Ever hear of a passkey, wise guy?" a sarcastic voice said.

A man with a lantern jaw stepped out of an alcove behind the bed. He held a Japanese Nambu in his right hand and the pistol was pointed at Chip's belt buckle. Two fingers were missing from the man's left hand and there was a bulge in his coat pocket that Chip knew was made by a tennis ball.

"I got a passkey." Fingers Jarvis said. "I can open any door in this hotel."

"So can I, wise guy." And a short, dark man in a brown double-breasted suit that hugged his middle, followed Jarvis out of the alcove. He didn't have a gun. He usually left that to his stooges.

"Pick Bazzoni!" Chip breathed the name as if it left a bad taste on his tongue. "You came up in the world. From pickpocket to murderer."

Bazzoni's tight lips moved and the words slid out of the corner of his mouth with a queer accent. "Fletcher? Shucks, so you killed him. That's the way it'll look."

Jarvis laughed and his jaw stuck out wide. "Sure thing, hero. Fletcher was killed with a slug from a Jap Nambu. The one I got in my hand. The one I took out of your bag. We got you right behind the eight-ball."

Chip sucked in his breath. He had to fight for time. He was knee deep in disaster and he had to plan quickly. He had to stall.

The Nambu didn't move in Jarvis' steady hand. He kept it trained on Chip's middle but he aimed his words at Bazzoni.

"Boss, I got a better idea. Wright didn't kill Fletcher. Fletcher killed him, and he shot Miss Goldilocks, too."

Bazzoni grinned like a ghoul. "Sure, I get it. Nobody can tell what a crazy man will do. He got Wright's gun and shot him and the girl, too."

Anne was getting green around the gills. "You'd even kill a woman?"

"Why not?" Bazzoni said. "Don't you think I know you're nothing but a stool pigeon for the D.A.? Don't you think I

know you dyed your hair blond and came to work here trying to nose out something to tie me up with Hal Wright's death? I'm not that dumb." Bazzoni laughed at Fingers Jarvis. "We can clean up all our troubles with two pulls on that trigger."

CHIP could see death around the corner. He had to arrange a detour and he had to do it fast. That Nambu could blast death at one squeeze of Jarvis's finger. He looked at Anne. That look went down beneath the blond hair and the artificial color on her face and into her heart. He saw the tenderness in her eyes and he knew he'd been blind as a bat to think that she had forgotten him.

But he had to pull an idea out of his head or it would be too late. He had to grab at anything to stop the squeeze of Jarvis's trigger finger.

"You killed my Exhibit A, you've got my gun, but you haven't got the slug that Fletcher took out of Dad's body. That will trip you up... even if you shoot us."

Bazzoni laughed without any sign. "Fletcher's got a slug in him. In a minute there'll be slugs in you and the dame. So we won't have to worry about the slug Deac Bond put in your old man."

"Bond?" Amazement bugged Chip's eyes out.

"Sure. Deac beat me to it. I wanted to rod him to get even with him killing Slats, but before I had a chance your old man bumped into a pay-off Deacon was collecting and Deac shot him. Then we caved in the porch railing to make it look like an accident and threw his body down on the fence spikes."

Chip sensed a reprieve from death in Bazzoni's words. "I bumped into a pay-off, too, Bazzoni, right after I got off the bus. A pair of shoes loaded with dough. And by now the D.A.'s got 'em and he'll put you and Bond where you belong."

Jarvis' lantern jaw jutted forward and his eyes looked lidless with hate. "That part's right, boss. He cached it to put you and Bond where you belong."

There was a pause, sinister, menacing, loaded with hate.

At that moment knuckles rapped ever so softly on the hall door.

Chip's heart started to beat again and

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the cold sweat stopped. He opened his mouth and yelled: "Come on in, Gregory! You're just in time."

Jarvis turned pale. Bazzoni froze.

Jarvis turned to the door, Nambu ready.

And the door opened and Chief of Police Frank Bond lumbered ponderously into the room, a rosy grin on his fat face and a brown wrapped parcel in his chunky hand.

Chip's heart climbed his throat and prickles of fear on his backbone fought the butterflies in his stomach. Here, in the ponderous bulk of the lecherous police chief, was final disaster. In that brown wrapped parcel was the last bit of evidence that he had hoped would stave off death for him and Anne.

The unholy trio had all the cards now. They could deal to suit themselves. The slug from his dad's body was still hidden in the capsule under Fletcher's arm but Chip couldn't figure out a way to use it to save their lives.

Bond was in ghoulish good humor. His pop eyes flicked over the body on the floor.

"Fletcher? Good. What's the pitch from here on?"

"It's rich," Bazzoni said. "It'll look like Wright got Fletcher out of Rest Haven and brought him here. Then Fletcher got bats in his belfry and got Wright's gun and shot him and the girl and then plugged himself. We got clear sailing from here on."

"Nice," said Bond. "Very nice."

Bond looked at Chip. No emotion was on his fat face. "The help you picked wasn't so hot. We had them storage lockers watched. When McCree showed up with that key you gave him, we glommed on to him and got the pay-off back. He told us where you were. He don't like pins under his fingernails."

He ripped open the brown package to reveal a pair of black, thick-soled shoes. He stuck a fat hand into one of them and lifted out a thin sheaf of bills. His thick fingers rifled them and Chip saw the 100s in the corners. Bond opened his blue coat and stowed the money in his bill fold.

Chip caught a fleeting glimpse of the snub-nosed .38 in the shoulder holster

on the left arm pit and he filed the information away in his brain. It might come in handy.

"You can go on with your other work, boys," Bond said.

Chip shrugged. This was pay dirt. If he fumbled the ball now he was sunk. He had to call the signals for the right play before the clock ran out. He had no backs to carry the ball for him. He had to do it alone. He had to outwit and outfight three men, two of them with guns, while he was unarmed.

HE ignored Bond. He turned his back suddenly on Fingers Jarvis and he could sense the lantern jawed man advancing behind him until he knew the Nambu was only scant inches away from the small of his back, right where Chip wanted it to be, where it had to be if his desperation plan was to have a chance to work.

Chip was face to face with Pick Bazzoni now. The dark, saturnine face was only a few feet away. Chip planted his feet squarely. Suddenly he pursed his tight lips.

"Punk!" he said, venomously, and spat into Bazzoni's face.

Crazy rage flooded the gangster's face. Demons of raw fury blazed in his dark eyes. Tensing his short body, he sprang forward, his open hands clutching with raking fingernails for Chip's face.

Chip made his move.

With feet firmly planted, he twisted his body sideways above the hips. His right hand flashed around and back as he bent slightly. The hard edge of his hand blasted into the side of Jarvis' neck, just below the ear.

The Nambu roared. The slug skipped past Chip's twisted torso and tore its way into Bazzoni's body. The gangster was dead when he struck the floor.

Jarvis was stumbling sideways, his eyes glazed, the Nambu hanging. Chip flashed around. His foot kicked up. It caught Jarvis' elbow and the gun flew out of his grasp. It slid across the floor and disappeared under the rickety bed.

Chip slugged out and his fist blasted Jarvis on the jaw. The lantern-jawed

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hoodlum fell forward.

Anne screamed a warning. "Chip!"

Chip leaped aside and the ponderous Bond steamed past, his right hand tugging at his arm pit. Chip leaped in, fists slugging. One-two in the fat torso, with all the drive in his hate-driven arms.

Bond balled down with his log-like arms. Chip stepped back. Then he lunged in, his left sinking to the wrist in the soft flabbiness. He followed it with a steaming right that seemed to busy itself to the elbow. An agonized gash escaped from Bond.

Chip got in closer. Then he lifted his head and sprang up on the balls of his feet. His head boomed into Bond's chin. The fat man staggered back, his arms flung behind him to catch himself. Then Chip let him have it. The guard was down. Chip's fist lashed out. It caught Bond flush on the jaw and rammed him backward. The big carcass went limp and sagged to the floor. He banged his head on the baseboard and lay still.

Chip jerked the .38 out of Bond's arm-pit and slipped it in his coat pocket. He took the billfold out of the fat man's coat and put it in his own.

Jarvis had regained consciousness. The lantern-jawed killer was scrambling under the rickety bed, his fingers searching for the Nambu. Chip sprang across the room. He left his feet and threw his body across the rickety bed. The head board caved in at a crazy angle. The spring and mattress let go and pinned Jarvis' scrambling body to the floor.

Anne was standing in the middle of the room, laughter bubbling from her lips.

"Chip," she said, "I can't help it. You look too funny."

The door opened and a man came in. He was neatly dressed, and a crisp gray mustache adorned his aristocratic face. "The taxi you sent never came, so I came alone. I heard everything from out in the hall. Looks like we've got Bond and Bazzoni and Jarvis where the hair is short."

Chip grinned from the bed. "I got Bond's gun and I'm betting the slug under Fletcher's arm will fit it. I got the pay-off Bond got and I got Anne as a witness that Bazzoni practically con-

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fessed that Bond killed Dad."

Chip's face was a wide grin. "Gregory, you can carry the ball from now on. I'm tired of fighting."

Anne crossed the room and got on the bed beside Chip. She put her lips to his. "Welcome Home, Soldier!"

HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 8)

the boat, is the body of his friend and partner, Douglas Collier. A tight wire has been drawn around his neck.

It was in the company of Collier and his sister Ivy, to whom Ward is engaged, that they all came to Florida and bought that piece of land from this fellow Hallet. It was on that land that little Mort was bitten. If Ward fails to reach there with the serum—

When he finally reaches Urquart's place, he finds there has been no phone call concerning little Mort—the boy wasn't bitten by a rattle. Furthermore, the word seems to have already gone out that Douglas Collier is missing. Otherwise, why is Sheriff Donaldson already there and why does he cross-question Ward so insistently? Then too—whose is the voice that drifts to Tom out of the darkness?

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[Turn page]



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he is in the Prison Ward of the hospital. He can't seem to figure out what it is all about.

Smooth-domed and apple-faced Inspector Fleming Morf of Homicide is there too, ably assisted by his roughneck shadow, Chuck Ryan. Berke knows that he must be pretty deep in something or other.

"Well, Berke," Inspector Morf gloats, "murder seems to have been your hobby for some time. Somebody—of course it couldn't be you—bumped off Anton Spivak with your gun. They've just dug the wallet out of Spivak's carcass. Now let's see you talk yourself out of this one."

The Inspector goes on to explain that Berke has been riding Spivak in his column. Incidentally friends, do you know what a "ringer" is? Well, in this case, it is a race-track term and means a horse which has been "made up" to look like another horse. Oh yes—it's been done a couple of times, we believe.

Of course Berke has an entirely different version of how he happens to be in the hospital. In a flash, it all comes back to him now. He remembers, in a fuzzy sort of way, wandering down the hallway on the third floor of the Berkshire Hotel. It was around midnight. Somebody rushed him and hit him on the head with the barrel of a gun—then placed the gun in his hand. Next, there was a shot and a bullet creased his scalp.

Returning hazily to consciousness, Berke realizes he must have gone down the back stairs instead of the front. He was looking for his wife who he knew was waiting for him in the car. The car came toward him—headlights a-gleam. Only instead of stopping for him, it hit him.

In the car, Gail tells him now, was Philip Henry Harrison, who has just cleaned up a fortune on his own horse, "Pirate Boy." As the song tells us now: "Horses don't bet on people."

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Anyway, Berke finds himself in the midst of a first-class murder frame. He realizes

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that in spite of Morf and Ryan, he must get out of aforesaid Prison Ward—bandaged head and jaw notwithstanding. Of course you know he gets out—but how?

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[Turn page]

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could print excerpts from each and every one of them.

A letter with an unusual point of view will usually get the green light. And we get so few gripes, that when one comes, we usually rush it to the press. For instance, we have a mild complaint from a lady "out where the tall corn grows," as the saying has it. Frankly, the lady's letter leaves us in just as much of a quandary as we were before it was written. What do you say, readers? We would like to have your opinion. Anyway, here's the letter:

In your issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE which you have dated June, 1947, you say in the story, THE EGG IN THE BIER, by A. J. Collins, on page 77 of Chapter IV, "I remembered there was some way you could write on the shell of an egg and the words would appear inside." You tell us that it can be done but don't explain how. You even go on to say: "I couldn't recall how it was done but evidently Tony (a character in the story) had known all about it."

In the first place, I do not believe it can be done. I have seen and have had incubated, eggs by the hundreds of thousands. I do not think it is fair to make a statement without proving it, particularly in the case of a hard-boiled egg. That means the egg was in water under terrific heat for over ten minutes. Was the writing put on after the egg was cooked?—Mrs. T. K. Esteban, Waterloo, Iowa.

All right, Ma'am—maybe we laid the egg instead of author Collins. Either that, or this whole thing belongs in "The Egg and I"—and no charge for the plug. It seems as if we also heard how it was done, way back when we were a kid—and that's a long time ago. We are inclined to string along with author Collins. Any of our readers know how it was done? Write in and let us know if you do and thank you very much for your letter, Mrs. Esteban.

Says a gentleman who is also from Iowa:

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